

The Children's Play, the Children's Way

by John R. Snyder

Anyone who has worked with elementary age children knows how important drama is to them. The making and performing of plays intersects with many of their most important developmental imperatives. In making plays, they hone their narrative skills, explore cause and effect, and gain insights into human psychology. In acting out plays, they practice taking on different personae -- important psychological experience for this age -- but in a safe and socially sanctioned context. The perspective-taking required in both writing and performing plays is not qualitatively different from that required to be a good friend or to understand people from different cultures. Finally, the production of plays is necessarily a group activity, a challenging and intricate collaboration of just the sort that captivates and inspires the gregarious Second Plane child.

Given the importance of drama to the elementary age child, how can we best offer opportunities for playmaking in our Montessori environments? Like everything else we offer in the prepared environment, the way playmaking is presented and supported is almost as important as the actual playmaking itself. Like Montessori children who say "Nobody taught me to read; I taught myself," our children can come away from theatrical productions saying, "Nobody taught us how to make a play; we just did it ourselves!"

In order to achieve this result, we adults have to let go of some of our notions about children and theater, and we have to find new ways to work with children that lead them gently and lightly in the right direction as they go about making their own plays.

We will not go very far with this until we are clear in our own minds and hearts that the children's plays belong to the children, not to us, the school, or the children's families. Let's face it, we all love to watch children on stage, and class plays are an immensely popular way to showcase the class for other adults. (I can vouch that even the late Walter Cronkite showed up for his nine year-old grandson's class play.) However, if we allow our desire to impress other adults to consciously or unconsciously govern how we work with the children, theater will always seem an adult-centered incongruity in a child-centered environment.

When we let the play belong to the children, we also have to recalibrate our expectations about how elaborate and polished the production should be. There is no doubt that a small army of enthusiastic, creative adults -- whether they be parent volunteers or children's theater specialists -- can work miracles with the sets, props, costumes, lighting, music, special effects, and programs for a children's play. And there is no doubt that the children can learn a few things looking over the shoulders of the adults as they put

together the children's play for them. Nevertheless, as Montessorians we are called by the children to "help them do it themselves," and this means we will need to learn to judge the success of a production by the children's standards, not our own. Our success as guides hinges on how little we "do for" the children, not how well the children do for us.

Another cherished tradition we may need to give up for the good of the children is the tradition of adapting adult plays for child actors -- or even of using adult-written plays at all. What?! No elementary productions of *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Our Town* or *The Sound of Music*? This is certainly a hard pill to swallow, but after seeing what children can do when they are given creative freedom to make plays out of their own life experiences and perspectives, I have come to think it's not such a difficult trade off. Children who learn to love drama through making plays will take opportunities later in life to act out the classics. Children who are force-marched through the classics may never again darken the door of a theater.

How the children make a play

We start out with a class meeting to discuss ideas for a play. What stories do we already know that might make a good play? What other stories might we make up for ourselves? From this brainstorming comes a list of books or stories to read, and perhaps a group or two will spontaneously form to work on ideas for an original play. If there are many stories or books to consider, groups of children might want to read one selection and present it to the class.

After a period of reading, discussing, and thinking together, the children converge on a story that can serve as the basis of our play. This could be an adaptation of an existing story or myth, or it could be an original work. Our last play was based on three episodes from Homer's *Odyssey*; the play before that was completely original.

We re-read the story a few times, noticing different aspects of it: how characters are introduced, how the plot moves along, how the time and place affect the plot and other particulars of the story, how the characters change during the story. Depending on the length and complexity of the story, we may need to leave some parts and some characters out, and we begin to debate how to do that so that the end result is coherent and still captures the themes and mood of the original. A group of children then volunteer to write a plot summary and develop a list of characters.

From the plot summary, the children develop a framework of acts and scenes, noting briefly the major events that happen in each scene. If there are too many short scenes (as is usually the case), there is an intermediate step of consolidation and perhaps another round of selection and editing of the plot.

Children are now given a chance to say how they would like to contribute to the play.

Who would like an acting part? With or without lines? Who would like to work on the sets, props, and costumes? Who would like to be co-directors?

The co-directors, perhaps assisted by the guide, think carefully about the characters and the available actors and draft a plan for casting. They call each actor one at a time and offer them the role that the co-directors think most suited to them, always having an option or two held in reserve in case the actor declines the proffered role. Characters are described to the prospective actor only in the sketchiest of terms. "Jason is a boy who is crazy about peanut butter." "Celina is a shy girl who is worried that her best friend Rita may abandon her for the new girl Angie."

Once the cast is set, each actor is invited to write a full character sketch of their character. A list of questions is available on the language shelf to aid in writing character sketches. All that is asked of the children is that they stay true to the minimalist description of the character given them when they agreed to take on that character. The character's other attributes are entirely the product of the actor's imagination. In this way, the children start to identify with and understand their character even before they do any acting.

The co-directors may now start calling rehearsals of specific scenes. At first, only the major characters in that scene are called to the rehearsal. The directors remind the actors what happens in the scene and then watch as the actors, staying in character as much as possible, improvise the scene. The actors and directors together note what worked and what didn't work, and they continue to practice the scene repeatedly until they have all converged on a satisfactory rendition.

The scene is then "frozen" and all practice from that time on focuses on polishing the scene and helping individual actors with the fine points of acting out their characters. It is astonishing (to adults) how quickly the children can work out a scene, and how well they can remember from day to day the lines and blocking they have improvised. In this way, the play comes to life in the minds and bodies of the children *without ever being written down*.

Scene by scene, act by act, the play takes shape through this process of guided group improvisation. Because of the prior framework of plot summary and character sketches, the play as a whole hangs together. Little issues of continuity that arise between scenes are worked out in the later rehearsals when the children begin to run through the whole play.

At this point performance dates can be set. Delaying the scheduling of performances is an important, if somewhat unconventional, practice. When dates are set ahead of time and maybe even put on the school calendar at the beginning of the year, the children's natural way of working is disrupted as they attempt to race the clock to get ready for their

performance.

As the scenes and acts come together, the directors and actors capture important information about the play such as what props are needed, what sets are needed, what costumes are required, how the lighting should work, what special effects there should be, and so forth. The guide can help as needed and may be particularly helpful in putting the children in touch with outside resources for the things they need for the play. As this information starts to gel, groups of children can begin to work on sets, props, costumes, etc.

Far from being intrusions on the regular life of the Montessori classroom, plays made in this way are organic creations that flow out of the life of the community. No longer is the class play a spectacle of children pretending to be little adults. Instead, the children's authentic literary voices emerge in ways both moving and enlightening -- but only if we have the faith and courage to let it be the children's play, the children's way.

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