'WHO AM I, MR. STANISLAVSKI?' AN EXPLORATION OF STANISLAVSKI'S 'SYSTEM' OF TRAINING ACTORS IN REALIZING CHARACTERIZATION IN THE 1999 IRISH DRAMA CURRICULUM (PRIMARY LEVEL)

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Abstract

In 1999, a new curriculum was launched at primary school level in Ireland. Surprise was expressed by classroom teachers when it was announced that Drama was to be a separate subject. At that time, some primary teachers were up-skilling in the use of Drama as a teaching methodology but this syllabus required teachers to teach 'process drama' rather than drama as a methodology for teaching other subjects. Process drama is a particularly challenging form of drama. It required the classroom teacher to become a form of playwright where she could weave the story, the content, improvisation and role-play into manageable chunks of rich learning. Many teachers felt were daunted. The curriculum documents were vague. The language was 'high brow'. There was the added complication where teachers were to move beyond role-play (described in the curriculum documents as 'a limited activity) into the complex field of characterization. No longer was the 'shepherd' a simple 'shepherd'. Now, he was a character with feelings, emotion, a background, a history. Many teachers did not know how to realize a character in a drama in their classroom. There was little concrete instruction in the curriculum documents as to how to help students move from role-play to the more sophisticated 'characterization'. When traditionally, continual professional development was on offer at local education centres, now (due to the strange 'newness' of this form of drama), CPD courses in Drama 'dried up'. I was one of those CPD facilitators in Drama but now I am left feeling nervous of leading teachers astray in teaching characterization. There was an irony in this because I am also a playwright. I began to question my own ability as a playwright.

Keywords: Educational Drama, Characterisation, Stanislavski.

1 METHODOLOGY

I made the decision to travel abroad (from Ireland) and conduct research, at Masters level at Cambridge University. Previously I had used action research as my preferred research approach but in this case I opted for case study as I wish to observe or 'notice deeply' the factors at play. My field research took place in Southern Ireland, in my own primary school where I have taught for over 30 years. It took place in May. The Sixth Class students (12/13 years old) were not my students but were senior students with some experience in drama. I chose 'The Titanic' as the story for exploration. I used Interviews, Work Samples and Journaling as my routes to find evidence (if any) of enhanced characterisation through the selection and implementation of some elements of Stanislavski's 'System' for training actors. Eventually, three elements emerged as useful strategies for realizing characterization.

2 RESULTS

It was clear that three qualities of characterisation emerged from the study - namely 'voice', 'empathy' and 'emotion'. Results indicated that the three elements could work well in certain circumstances but that Sixth Class students are not amenable to Drama in their final months in primary school.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Despite the constraints of my study and results, I can, nevertheless, see great merit in going beyond role-play into the sphere of characterization. It is easier to experience empathy, emotion and to cultivate voice. My playwriting has improved. My teaching of Drama is richer. I can now help my students to reach inside themselves and, using their imagination, create colourful characterization that may live on in their hearts, long after they have left primary schools. Further study into Stanislavski's
'System' can, I am confident, help teachers teach and delve and explore the personal, the subjective in our sometimes arid classrooms.

REFERENCES