

# Stepping into Action: Possible Convergences Between Process Drama and Francophone Theatre Education Practices

WRITTEN BY JOHN THIEL



John Thiel working with students in Arlington, Massachusetts | Photo by Noël Li

In my learning of approaches to theatre education as a graduate student and classroom drama teacher, I have often been struck by the relatedness of concepts that drive practices in the field, even among traditions arising from different communities, cultures, and theoretical and ideological perspectives. I have wondered how

understandings of the practice of theatre and drama with young people are shared across traditions. *Are there meaningful points of connection between theatre education communities that could contribute to a richer understanding of our work as teachers and learners?* As I have been researching the teaching and learning of theatre

as practiced in Québec, I have kept this question in mind.

My own theatre teaching with K-5 students in the United States is influenced by the work of Anglophone practitioners of process drama. In view of the ways understandings of best practices in theatre education can be limited by



geographic boundaries and linguistic barriers, I have been looking for areas of possible convergence between the process drama and the theories and methods unique to Francophone contexts.

I speak of “possible convergences” because the question remains open. How compatible are the approaches of traditions that have their own cultural and pedagogical values, historical movements, and lived experiences with theatre and drama in their communities? I embrace process drama because I find that it welcomes the many possible dramatic forms that arise from the cultures and lived experiences of the communities doing the work. However, I recognize

that methods in theatre education, as Helen Nicholson puts it in her book *Theatre, Education and Performance*, “have always been interwoven with the dramatic and educational innovations of their day.” Theatre education in Québec, too, carries a history of development in teaching practice which reflects an evolution of beliefs about the purpose of education in theatre and drama. Some findings arising from Québécois practice run counter to recommended methods in process drama and vice versa. For example, there is little to be found in Francophone literature that explores teacher-in-role. In my reading of Francophone literature and discussions with Québécois practitioners, I have attempted to center my research on questions

that Francophone and Anglophone practitioners have in common.

One area that I believe holds resonance in both traditions surrounds the conditions that incite learners to engage in dramatic action. Francine Chaîné identifies “the taste for entering action” as one of the qualities necessary for dramatic play. Hélène Beauchamp defines “dramatization” as “the putting into action (*la mise en action*) of images that arise in the individual and in the collective.” I have found inspiration in Dorothy Heathcote’s description of the dramatic process as, “the miracle of how thinking about a dramatic idea can in an instant become that of carrying it into action.” Jonathan Neelands expands on this principle



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in his *Making Sense of Drama*, referring to the “switch” from “would to is” as “an immediate indication that the group has moved into drama-time.” How can teachers help students achieve the switch? How can we promote a taste for stepping into action? A focus on action is relevant, too, to my own teaching. I have been revising a process drama that I will use this spring to launch a play-making process with K-2nd grade learners. I offer here some of the research of Francophone practitioners into the nature of dramatic action which has become a fertile source for reflection as I cultivate practices that might better support my students in their engagement with each other, the world of our play, and the work of theatre-making.

### Story and frame

Francophone practitioners have noted the effectiveness of story and fictionalization in motivating dramatic action. In her book on youth theatre and theatre for young audiences, *Apprivoiser le Théâtre*, Hélène Beauchamp links working with story (*la fable*) to several aspects of the impulse to create: story enables participants’ “expression in words,” allows the “deepening of fictional and familiar worlds,” facilitates the structuring of images and actions, and fosters the development of content and the “awareness and clarifying of themes.” Drawing from understandings of production and performance (*mise en scène*), Diane Saint-Jacques finds that methods of improvisation fall short if they emphasize expression and action only, arguing that “the quality” of the taking of action “is revealed in the precision of character and

story.” Similar perhaps to the way “frame” in process drama usage enacts dramatic tension, Saint-Jacques views “the precision of fictive meaning (*la précision du sens fictif*)” and its embodiment in the work of the player (*le joueur*) as necessary for theatre-making both in the classroom and on stage.

Though my teaching through process drama centers on the building of narrative, I am moved to consider how well my structuring of dramatic forms works to engage my students in the story we are creating. In reviewing lesson plans for our exploration of the rainy, muddy world of our play on the first day of rehearsal, I see an emphasis on variation in tone, role, and form, which is not always coupled with a drive to further the narrative through the actions of characters. These reflections constitute a philosophical shift in focus. *What would it look like to concern me less with a progression of actions but instead with the construction of the narrative? How would it shape students’ experiences if I looked not only for evidence of expressiveness and risk-taking in action but for precision in my students’ embodying of character?* Practically, the language of intentions could serve my students well. They are not merely “walking in the mud” but “trying not to get stuck” or “helping each other stay dry,” according to the needs of the unfolding narrative. As I prepare my process drama for my work with my students, I will seek to clarify the dramatic tension that guides their actions at each step in the process and look for opportunities in my students’ engagement with the story to deepen their creative work.

### Space and place

Francophone theatre education practitioners also frequently acknowledge space and place as essential to the student’s stepping into dramatic action. Spatial considerations are present in process drama tradition as strategy and foundational theatre form, but I wonder if Québécois practice accords more central importance to this component of the work. “If we want children to create in theatre,” says Hélène Beauchamp, they must “master...not only the discipline of theatre but also the working space of their classroom.”

Beauchamp’s model for theatre learning charts a progression in improvisations and games by which learners “explore and understand the space for themselves,” imagine and “conceptualize” fictional places, and make these places “concrete” through the physical transformation of the working space. Through this process, learners grow in autonomy to create and in willingness to connect with others. They also have more resources to engage in their fictive world.

I see the centrality of space and place manifested in applied theatre contexts as well. In her article, “When Inuit Sculpture Opens Into Stories,” written in English, Francine Châiné offers practices for drama and theatre-based explorations of a museum exhibit in which participants move immediately from establishing the given circumstances of their role to exploring where characters are “located in theatrical space.”



Another striking example of the importance of spatial considerations comes from the practice of “global simulations” in second-language learning, a strategy which educators Joseph Dicks and Barbara Le Blanc have used in tandem with process drama structure. In global simulations planning, the first step is to engage students in constructing a *lieu-thème*, a place-theme, which establishes the physical and social milieu on which to build and play. I find myself naturally using language that evokes places and themes together when introducing fictional worlds of play to my students. The concept of *lieu-thème* embraces this way of working.

One way that I can take on this emphasis is in my choice of prompts for dramatic play, which I often use to open my classes. *Are my suggestions centered entirely on a character's actions, feelings, or movement, or do they also awaken the consciousness of my students' physical and fictive environments?* I also plan to include the active physical construction of one part of our play's world before I invite participants to take on roles in this space. As shaping and structuring playable areas in space is central to my work as a director, I want to engage my students more fully in this essential part of the dramatic process. “Imagination,” says Beauchamp, “is concentrated not only in character but also in their place of life and action.”

This imaginative work of dramatic action, through the embodied exploration of story and character in the physical world in which they live, is what I wish for my students. I have offered that looking into what makes the stepping into dramatic action possible constitutes a point of convergence between the tradition of process drama and the research of those Francophone practitioners whose work has inspired me. It is my



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hope that continued conversation among practitioners in our field will lead to growing understanding across cultures and within our own traditions of the approaches to theatre education that will enrich the lives and the artistic practices of our students.

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