CONFERENCE REVIEW

NYU Forum on Educational Theatre
NYU Steinhardt, New York, April 21-24, 2016

NYU Forum on Educational Theatre is the 13th annual forum held by the Program in Educational Theatre, NYU Steinhardt. The Forum attracted over 120 delegates from North America and Asia-Pacific regions, and a small attendance of postgraduates. There were about 70 paper and narrative presentations, and 50 workshops and performances.

This was my first NYU Forum, and I enjoyed the small and cosy ambience. The Forum didn’t feature any keynote speeches. The 4-day Forum opened with an evening master class conducted by Tim Webb of Oily Cart. Webb worked with a group of postgraduates on the use of theatre with autistic young people. The Forum delegates observed the session and took part in a debriefing afterwards. The next day began with another master class with Cecily O’Neill teaching a group of high schoolers. The three days were organized into three different threads—drama in education, applied theatre, and theatre for young audiences and play production. The Forum closed on the fourth evening where Peter O’Connor initiated the first-of-its-kind “conference found poem”, and the Forum delegates joined in with their own lines of conference experiences. Within minutes, a collective found poem capturing the delegates’ lingering thoughts and feelings was formed.

The Forum experience was different from many of my other conference experiences especially those of the big conferences. The paper or narrative sessions had quality presentations, and were often attended by a focused audience with quality feedback and sincere questions. There was plenty of sharing of thoughts and genuine interests in knowing more of the projects or studies shared. The 30-minute lunch podcast format fitted into a university campus pedagogical space. There was also a teaching artist job information session. All of these reminded me of my own campus life and departmental seminars back at my postgraduate days.
The Forum gathered projects that show how performance and drama connect communities and the everyday. David Grant’s community performance project staged the changing streetscape of Tiger’s Bay in Northern Ireland “Troubles” from 1970s to 90s to a local audience. The audience witnessed streets fading behind a “peace wall”, changing names, and their memories and understanding of the changing streetscape faded in. We listened to Monica Prendergast’s work of developing an interdisciplinary high-school performance studies curriculum which aims to connect students to aspects of identity, play, representation, power and everyday experience as they are learning to master performance literacy. Drama/theatre education often draws inspirations or takes its cue from the familiar and the everyday. Christine Sinclair reflected on the notions of “harm” and “risk-taking” in the performative space, and explored the ethics of care in applied theatre and drama when real stories provide the substance of the practice. Muriel Law presented interview findings from 14 Hong Kong drama facilitators’ use of dramatic conventions, and her paper asked how drama educators could work with their workshop participants in capturing the elusiveness of everyday life as an object of critical reflection as well as representation.

In formal educational contexts, drama pedagogy does not exist alone but alongside other pedagogical practices. Peter Duff and his panelists—co-authors of *A Reflective Practitioner’s Guide to (Mis)Adventures in Drama Education*—examined the significance of reflective practice as continuous teacher professional development. When the mainstream pedagogy is seemingly prescriptive, drama educators need to recommit what we are doing as a teacher, and to embrace the resistant students and their reasons to resist, the panelists said. In the area of English language education, Norifumi Hida studied the curriculum history of drama in English as foreign language (EFL) education in Japan, and traced the changing dramatic approaches since 1930s as a case of glocalisation. Enid Larsen and her US team of artist-scholar-educators studied the impacts of the arts-integrated English as a secondary language (ESL) professional development programme they offered Spanish elementary teachers. They observed that drama pedagogy actively engaged the Spanish young students with multimodal linguistics and social performances. Christina
Marín demonstrated in a 30-min mini workshop how she employed playwriting as a pedagogical strategy that enabled students to learn SAT vocabulary. Given lists of words and familiar themes or scenarios, students were to write dialogue and stage directions using a certain number of words on their given lists. Her student-informants, as Marín observed, were more ready to maintain the vocabulary and to incorporate words into their everyday vernacular.

A few presentations in the Forum interrogated the economic relations and material conditions of drama education and theatre production. Byoung-Joo Kim reviewed the South Korea case of government-led nation-wide arts education in the last decade. He discussed the implications of job-driven arts education development on teaching-artist training and mentoring. Ross Prior analysed course descriptors, or “sales pitch” as he referred to them, of 8 UK masters programmes in applied theatre and drama. He raised questions about the knowledge claims, social responsibility and sense of ethics of those programme descriptors in preparing their prospective students as future artist-educators in the diverse and changing field. Molly Mullen examined how different applied theatre groups/companies responded to the tensions and dilemmas arising out of the demands and constraints of the funding relationships and economic conditions in which these groups/companies were produced. Informed by Gibson-Graham and their colleagues’ (2006; 2013) feminist critique of political economy and their work of community economies, Mullen looked into the possibilities of diverse economies for applied theatre makers in the capitalist/neoliberal economies.

As a whole, these presentations remind us that as performative practices, theatre/drama education offer chances to investigate our memories and lived experiences, as well as to open up alternative practices in curriculum development and community building. Some of these presentations offer a glimpse of the current global and local development of drama in formal education, and some interrogate the economic relations between theatre production and the capitalist/neoliberal practices. With the latter, practitioner-academics ask what alternative modes of socio-economic relations and processes could be made possible instead of willingly subsumed
into the neoliberal discourses and practices.

**Theatre/Drama Education and the Practice of Hope in the Neoliberal World**

In her book *Fair Play*, Jen Harvie (2013) captures a proliferation of audience participation in performance and other forms of art in the UK, which include attempts to inviting audiences to participate, act, work and create together; observe one another; or simply be together. The phenomenon concerns Harvie when viewed through the broader social context where the political economy is running on neoliberalist principles of deregulation, privatization and reduction in government spending — expressed in insufficient social housing provision, privatization of formerly state-supported schooling and healthcare, and withdrawal of state-support for higher education. Harvie asks what the expansion of socially engaged art and performance practice can actually offer audiences and social relations. She thinks the question: “How do these potentially socially democratic art practices and neoliberal capitalist ideologies produce, inform, challenge and/or undermine each other?” (p. 3)

The broad socio-economic context looks familiar here in Hong Kong. Local applied theatre makers or companies, large or small, would know very well how arts funding systems operate in favour of competition and close alignment to market goals and activities. It has impacts on their organizational practices and management. Market principles and managerialism have been influencing schooling practices and educational policies in local schools—one major formal educational setting that drama/theatre education intervenes (Tse 2005; Ball 2016). Stephen J. Ball (2016), the renowned British critical educator, contends that neoliberalism changes not only the state-economy relations, but also social relations as it lurks around seducing individuals into neoliberal subject. In fact, in capitalist societies, it would be odd if schools under neo-liberal governance did not instill such values. So are there alternatives? Where does hope lie? Could educators, drama practitioners and applied theatre companies take back the school, the
economy, and social relations from the capitalists/neoliberals? If so, how?

Here, a turn to Paulo Freire’s pedagogy could be useful. Freire (1992) reminds us that hope is an ontological need, and it does not come out in mere claims of hopefulness. Rather it “demands an anchoring in practice” (p. 2). Freire sees hopelessness and despair as “both the consequence and the cause of inaction or immobilism.” (p. 3) To practice hope, he suggests that we detach from and perceive the “given” situations that prevent us from becoming a free person as “limit situations”, as a problem that ought to be confronted and overcome (pp. 181-182). When detached and perceived as a problem, we would uncover in the limit situations some “untested feasibility” which is “an untested thing, an unprecedented thing, something not yet clearly known and experienced” (p. 182).

So how could we practice hope in the seemingly totalizing neoliberalist discourses and practices, and make it historically concrete in our schools, society and economy? The tips from Freire would be: let us “act”, and let us detach from “the given” and perceive it as a problem rather than passively accepting it. Or to put it differently, let us experiment and action-research ways that would uncover the untested within the neoliberal capitalist political economies—the limit situations.

As a matter of fact, after the three-month long Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014, some activists have been pushing forward movements or acts so as to realize self-determination, civic participation, and sharing in different communities. The Community Citizen Charter is one such movement. Its purposes are to organize citizens, scholars and professionals to work together in the community, and to seek creative solutions to improving their own community lives. In so doing, the Charter attempts to rally an “unlimited power” (Community Citizen Charter, 2015, October 11) that may reconstitute the order instigated by pro-establishment forces. Probably, we need this kind of sustained concerted actions if we are to take back our economies of applied theatre-making, our social relations, and the most difficult of all, our schools.
Note

1 For the details of the Community Citizen Charter and the community actions, please visit their websites and Facebook page: https://sites.google.com/site/hkcccharter/she-qu-gong-min-yue-zhang; https://www.facebook.com/CommunityCitizenCharter/

Reference


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