



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1990 Volume II: Contemporary American Drama: Scripts and Performance

Introduction

This seminar, entitled “Contemporary American Drama: Scripts and Performance, was a response to requests from teachers for some detailed attention to the process of interpreting scripts for stage presentation. We read together a group of contemporary plays that focus on questions of love, marriage, family, friendship, and political responsibility: David Mamet’s *Reunion* and *Dark Pony*, Sam Shepard’s *Fool for Love*, Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, Wallace Shawn’s *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, Christopher Durang’s *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, and Jules Feiffer’s *Grown Ups*. We approached the scripts through analysis of characters and scenes, the finding of implicit objectives and conflicts, a consideration of stylistic differences, and an exploration of supplementary theatre games and improvisations. When we took up *For Colored Girls*, James Luse of Long Wharf Theatre told us about the production he had directed at Fairfield University and led us in some pertinent improvisations. The second half of our sequence of meetings was devoted to the preparation and rehearsal of selected material for in-class performance. Three Fellows prepared monologues from *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*; the remaining eight (in two groups of four) prepared under my direction most of Act 1 of *Grown Ups*.

Our movement in seminar from scripts to performance was handled on an adult level, as if we were an amateur repertory group. We assumed that our learning would then find its applicability in various ways in classrooms of younger students. As it happened, all of the Fellows in this seminar usually work with students in the younger grades—five with elementary schools, five with middle schools, and one with high-school freshmen. For that reason, none of the curriculum units have a close relation to our own performance work except in the area of improvisations and theatre games. It therefore seems appropriate to entitle this volume “Learning through Drama.” That is the major thrust of all of the units, which variously continue the exploration of the educational potentialities of the dramatic medium that was begun by such notable figures as Dorothy Heathcote and Brian Way in Great Britain and has been supplemented in this country by the work of Viola Spolin and others.

The curriculum units run a gamut of immediate applicability from Kindergarten through Grade 9. But they also run a more complex and important gamut from a primary concern with the dramatic process to a concern with the uses of that process in various kinds of teaching; and I have arranged them in accord with this gamut of concerns. Kelley O’Rourke’s “The Creative Dramatics Cookbook: Recipes for Playmaking” (K-5) and Sylvia Petriccione’s “Improvisational Drama—Without Words” (2-6) concern themselves primarily with the dramatic process itself. Pamela Fowler’s “We are One” (5-8) uses theater games to develop “trust” within the classroom. Carol Wong’s “Pick-A-Path Playhouse” (K-3) uses script development on the basis of stories as a means of eliciting creativity. Mia Edmonds-Duff’s “The Preparation of a Play to be Performed before a School Audience” (7-8) has an emphasis on the encouragement of Afro-American self-esteem, and Cheryl Merritt’s

“Drama: A Family Connection” (6-8) has an emphasis on substance abuse and family values. The remaining five units contain yet more extensive application of drama to various areas of the curriculum. Francis Jeanne Sandahl’s “ ‘Come Alive’ Social Studies: A Study of Culture through Playwriting” (4) uses drama in the study of the river cultures of Ancient Egypt. Jeanette Gaffney’s “The Amistad Affair: Problem Solving through Theater” (7), as its title indicates, engages a topic in “Life Skills” through an important episode in history. Sally Kaczynski’s “What’s a Nice Girl Like Me Doing in a Place Like This?” (7-8) uses drama to introduce certain issues of marriage and motherhood as seen in recent decades. Antonia Coughlin’s “Acting Up in Contemporary Law” (9) engages an important topic in freshman history. And Bill Derry’s “Melting Pot Theater: Teaching for Cultural Understanding” (K-5) integrates several grade-levels and several school subjects in a master-plan for study through performance of three cultures, those of Puerto Rico, Russia, and Ghana.

Several of these units have been prepared by Fellows who regularly work with various classrooms in a number of schools. All of the units, however, contain approaches that are applicable beyond the situations or topics specified. We commend them to your attention.

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