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The value of theatre as a teaching method in tertiary education: the activities of the Students' Drama Club at the University of Oradea

The use of drama activities has long been advocated by teachers and researchers in the field of foreign and second language education. Drama provides English language learners with opportunities to express themselves in English for a “meaningful” purpose (Krashen 67–68, 83, 132–133), going beyond mechanical vocabulary practice and grammar drills. According to Fels and McGivern, language learning is always cultural learning, and for that purpose drama techniques in the language classroom are the most effective:

successful foreign- or second-language learning requires an embodied understanding by the learner of the context, land, history, cultural, social, and political environments experienced by first-language speakers. Drama transforms the four walls of a classroom into a variety of situations, environments, and relationships that require students to take on roles and context-specific language. (Fels and McGivern 20)

Unfortunately, while teaching a foreign language through drama methods is frequently used by enthusiastic foreign language teachers, theatre is no part of the curricula in Romanian high schools and secondary schools, so few students enter tertiary education (college or university) with interest, let alone skill, in theatre. Theatre education in Romania below the college or university level is incidental. There are Christmas plays and end-of-the year school performances in primary school, after-school drama clubs in secondary and high schools, and some theatre competitions for youth theatre groups, but this is as far as it goes.

At university level, drama is part of the literature curriculum, but students experience it only through reading, watching movies or recorded performances. At literature courses, whether Romanian or foreign literature, there is no difference in teaching methods between teaching drama and teaching prose. Students of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Oradea go to the theatre on a voluntary basis only. The local theatre in Oradea does not adjust its repertoire to the undergraduate drama curriculum.

To make up for this hiatus, to impart a more informed awareness of what theatre is and how it works, as well as to give our students an extra-curricular activity,

thanks to which they may hone their English language skills and that they may find both useful and entertaining, the Department of English Language and Literature of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Oradea founded the Students' Drama Club in 2012. It is an amateur theatre group that performs plays in the English language. While it has been initiated by the Faculty of Letters, it accepts as members students from any other faculty of the University of Oradea as well, provided their knowledge of English is at least at intermediate level.

The main goal of the Students' Drama Club is the production of a play per year. Till present it has staged six plays performed at various venues, such as the local Arcadia theatre, festivity halls of various local high schools, lecture halls, and the conference room of the County Library. Students who join the Drama Club on a voluntary basis are involved in all the stages play production: the choice of the script (sometimes in writing it), casting, directing, designing stage sets and costumes, the choice of venues and advertising of the performance, including posters that advertise the play, teaser videos, and articles popularising the play in the Students' Gazette etc.

While our ultimate aim is the preparation of a play for public presentation, great emphasis is placed on the task of understanding the dramatic text in a non-scholarly way, on learning to work creatively with a given script. There are three types of scripts that we work with: dramas written by well-known playwrights, scripts created on the basis of famous short-stories and epics, and scripts of a mere technical-theatrical value. Each type of script has its advantages and disadvantages.

From the academic and theatrical point of view, the most rewarding but, at the same time, the most demanding scripts are the ones written by professional playwrights. In 2014 we staged Morris Panych's existential comedy: *7 Stories* and in 2015 William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We have performed both plays several times at various venues; the performances at Arcadia Theatre were also filmed¹. Taken into account that all the people involved in the two plays were non-professionals, work at the production of both plays was hard and time-consuming, with occasional conflicts among the members of the cast, and between the coordinator of the club and the actors. A long time was spent on the discussion of the meaning(s) of the scripts, their historical, political, cultural, and – in the case of Panych's play – philosophical background. Both plays proved lengthy and difficult, we had to cut some of the scenes or shorten them, and also change some of the words we feared our audience, who knew English as a foreign language only, may fail to understand. Thus, two valuable lessons were learned: first and foremost, that the performance of a play was a creative team work rather than a mere mechanical learning and reproducing of the script by individual actors, and second, that the audience was an active (and not passive) part of the performance.

Scripts inspired by famous short stories and epics are the ones that harness the creativity of the students to its utmost. We have had two performances of this kind: a three-act comedy inspired by Oscar Wilde's famous short-story: "The Canterville

¹ The performance of Morris Panych's *7 Stories* at Arcadia Theatre can be watched on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fdqWij16Hc&t=5s>.

Ghost" in 2013, and an existential drama in 20 scenes, inspired by Lord Byron's satirical poem: *Don Juan* in 2016. In the case of both scripts work started in a similar way: we read and analysed the texts emphasising their plot and characters, split the plot into acts and scenes, and the students volunteered for writing specific scenes. When they finished, the scenes were pieced together, some corrections and stylistic changes performed and, when ready, we started to rehearse them. The benefits of transforming a piece of prose and an epic poem into drama were manifold: students worked creatively with literary texts that at literature courses they read and analysed only, they became aware of the importance of the plot and conflict, of the differences between real-life conversations and stage-dialogue, and between the written word and the spoken word. They found it easy to transform Oscar Wilde's hilarious short story into a comedy. After all, Wilde wrote not only fiction but several successful plays as well. His dialogues, even if they made part of a work of prose, could be used in our script almost verbatim.

The work on Lord Byron's *Don Juan* posed more problems. It was a very long epic poem without any dialogue. The plot was episodic and repetitive, and the students found most of the characters repulsive or foolish. The literary value of the poem was attained by the beauty of its language, but very little of Byron's words could be used for the dialogues of our script. Writing the script took several weeks and the end-product, even after several rewritings, was far from satisfactory. "We all think we know what a play is", said Ronald Hayman in *How to Read a Play*," but no one has ever succeeded in defining it. A novel or a poem is neither more nor less than the words it consists of, but a script is obviously less than a play, while a production is obviously more". His claim proved painfully true in our case, as far as our script was concerned: it was a weak script lacking a convincing conflict, a script filled with flat characters, which the student-author-actors found insipid and boring. It was worse than "less than a play". It wasn't a play at all. The students grew very critical of the characters they couldn't empathize with, and the weakness and artificiality of the plot that neither they, nor the coordinator of the club could improve. Their rebelliousness and the unexpected arrival of an incredibly motivated and stubborn student who wanted to be, by all means, part of the cast, resulted in the introduction of an extra character into the script: that of Lord Byron. The character, inspired by the personality of the real-life Byron was fighting his inner demons. He was lively and convincing. He grew, within a few rehearsals, from mere episodic character into the main character of the play, and, eventually inspired the main conflict of the plot: the conflict between the creator and the created: between the author of the satirical poem and the characters from his work. The public performance that, initially and for a good reason, the whole cast feared would be a fiasco, proved to be quite successful with the audiences, and the student-author-actors grew fond of it, eventually.

The third category of scripts that we use for our performances have only stage and acting value. Some of them are available free of charge on various internet sites, while others can be bought at a very low price. Their advantage is that one can choose a play for a specific number of students or/and on a specific theme. The disadvantage of using such scripts with students from the Faculty of Letters is that

they are of a questionable literary value. When working with such scripts, emphasis falls mainly on character building, on the nature of the emotional connection(s) between various characters, on stage set and props, and on nonverbal communication that may add new layers of meaning to the play. We succeeded in performing two scripts of this kind: *Bad Habits Club* in 2012, a no-author script, and *The Dane* in 2018, a play by James O'Sullivan.

Bad Habits Club, the very first script the Students' Drama Club worked on, was a lucky choice for a fledgling amateur theatre club: a short morality play with a predictable plot and simple, straightforward characters personifying various human vices: Mr. Lazy, Mr. Boozer, Miss Flirty etc. The script lacked both stage instruction and detailed character description. We started to build the characters based on their telling names and provided them with age, looks, interests, and attitudes towards each other and towards themselves. The students made stereotypical choices: Miss Flirty was played young and insecure, Mrs. Gossipy old, arrogant etc. Mr. Boozer and Mr. Lazy were good friends, Miss Flirty and Mrs. Gossipy jealous frenemies. We paid meticulous attention to nonverbal communication: every gesture had to mean something.

James O'Sullivan's *The Dane* was a one-act satirical play for four characters on the theme of corruption. The plot revolved around a flawed, fraudulent casting for the main role in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As the play was a bit short, the students thought of lengthening it by including Hamlet's famous soliloquy, which proved incredibly useful and rewarding from a scholarly point of view, for, during the rehearsals, we could discuss its meanings and watch and analyse the ways (mood, delivery, attitude, symbolism of stage set and props) in which it was interpreted on the stage and on film by famous actors such as Lawrence Olivier, Richard Burton, Kenneth Branagh and Benedict Cumberbatch.

When turning scripts of any kind into a public performance, students are made aware of the fact that theatre is a fictional, constructed reality, that acting isn't nature; it's art, and art is something we have to create with dedication and care so as to represent conflicts, emotions etc. on the stage with truth and beauty. They are also made aware of the fact that, in any performance there is a double interaction: an interaction with fellow actors and an interaction with the audience. The two interactions are of equal importance.

Character analysis and its stage interpretation is paramount at the Students' Drama Club. After the script has been chosen, we read it together and do the casting. Casting is never competitive (the activities of the club are meant to be reassuring and fun!) but based on common agreement. Students are invited to volunteer for various roles. After the casting has been done, we analyse each character in detail. The actors are invited to express their opinion and relationship with the characters they interpret. Some of them feel close to their character and build it up borrowing much from their real-life experience. These students manage to metamorphose into their role as much as Constantin Stanislavsky² wished his actors to metamorphose

² "on the stage we live on emotional memories of realities. At times these memories reach a point of illusion that makes them seem like life itself. Although such a thing as complete forgetting of self and unwavering belief in what is happening on the stage is possible, it

into their roles. Others have to interpret characters that feel remote in age, ethnic background or social status. The interpretation of such roles is a true intellectual challenge, as the actors have to do background readings on the motivation and characteristic body language of the role they interpret on the stage, and build the character from without and not from within. In spite of the extra work it requires, students find these roles liberating. They can shed their real-life personality for a short while and change into someone else, who is completely different.

Sometimes students find it difficult to distance the stage from real life, the role they play on the stage from their real-life character. This is usually the case when they have to interpret a character that feels close in age, situation and social status, but whose personality they dislike, and whose choice(s) they disagree with. Many times the problems that these characters have to deal with on the stage mirror the fears and conflicts the students experience in their everyday lives. According to students, such roles reflect badly on their real-life personality, and have to make serious efforts to empathise with the character that embodies their worst fears. This was the case of the student that interpreted the role of Helena in W. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night Dream*. The girl was repulsed by the recklessness and humiliation of the character, whose obsessive love for the character of Demetrius was actually the driving force of the plot. It took her several weeks to accept that she was not Helena, but only the actress interpreting the role of Helena.

During the rehearsals, students are invited to communicate ideas regarding their own roles, but also to contribute with words of encouragement and/or constructive criticism to the building of all the other roles. This helps to understand the extent to which the behaviour of the character they themselves interpret is shaped by the behaviour and reactions of the other characters, and also makes them feel responsible not only for their individual roles but for the acting work of the entire cast.

Unfortunately, due to a dearth of time and resources, we can't invest as much energy into the creation of stage sets, costumes and props as we do into the analysis or creation of the scripts, and the analysis and building up of characters. Students regret this because they are fond of realistic stage sets, props and costumes, as they help their imagination. Moreover, most of them are accustomed to the realistic theatrical convention, and find it difficult to understand and accept that a so-called realistic stage set is as artificial and fabricated as a symbolical one. The lesson they have to learn is that any public performance is based on the tacit agreement between the actors and the audience, according to which anything that the actors pretend to experience on the stage (however improbable or absurd) must be taken for granted by their public.

The use of drama to integrate and support all language skills (the listening, reading, speaking and writing skills) of foreign language learners, and the role that drama can play in negotiating language, culture and identity cannot be emphasised enough. During the activities of the Students' Drama Club attention is paid to the

occurs rarely. We know of separate moments, long or short in duration, when an actor is lost in 'the region of the subconscious.' At such times a creative artist feels his own life in the life of his part and the life of his part identical with his personal life. This identification results in a miraculous metamorphosis" (Stanislavski 307).

acquisition of correct pronunciation and enunciation, to the understanding of new vocabulary (if any), text comprehension and to grammatical correctness. Besides honing the students' skills with the English language, the aims of the Students' Drama Club of the University of Oradea is also to teach literature, to teach oratory and delivery, to teach teamwork, to teach assertive communication and self-confidence. We also find it a useful way to establish a relationship between our university and the surrounding community. Performances at the university campus, where we invite not only students but also pupils and townspeople who are fond of English language and literature, the performances at theatre venues, public libraries and festivity halls prove effective advertisements of university education.

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Abstract

The Author describes the main goals of the of the Students' Drama Club of the University of Oradea. The Club was founded in 2012 in Department of English Language and Literature of the Faculty of Letters. It is an amateur theatre group that performs plays in the English language. Students are involved in all the stages of the production of the play. Drama Club attention is paid to the acquiring of correct pronunciation and enunciation, to the understanding of new vocabulary and text comprehension. Besides the honing of the students skills with the English language, the aims of the Students' Drama Club is also to teach literature, oratory and teamwork, and to teach assertive communication and self-confidence. The activity of Drama Club is also a useful way to establish a relationship between the university and the surrounding community.

Keywords: Drama Club at the University of Oradea, theatre in education, language skills, foreign language learning

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Photos from our Performances





