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Using Drama as a Cultural Bridge

by Liane Brouillette

Sitting in a cabin near Rocky Mountain National Park during an Association for Experiential Education Regional Conference workshop, a group of educators discussed the difficulty of incorporating into the United States history curriculum the experiences of Native Americans who walked this land in the centuries before the first Euro-American arrived. Looking out windows which kept out the crisp April wind while affording a spectacular panorama of the snow-covered Mummy Range, we spoke of the difficulty of coming to grips with what this land had meant to a people who had not blocked themselves off from the weather with barriers of wood and glass. No matter what we might experience on short excursions into the wilderness, our awareness had been shaped by a civilization in which spring mattresses, central heating, even air conditioning, have become a more familiar part of everyday life than falcons, trout and deer.

How could we build a bridge to the life experiences of a people who had created all necessary material supports out of native materials such as stone, bone, wood and leather? How could we discard that intellectual lens which could too easily lead us, in a sort of knee-jerk reaction, to assume that a culture's lack of material conveniences must indicate a "primitive" understanding of the world. How could we plumb the meaning of Leslie Marmon Silko's depiction in *Ceremony* (see box 1; 1977, p. 132) of the pre-Columbian world?

While teaching high school history, back in the mid-1980s, I had grappled with the problem of presenting American history as more than just the tale of massive immigration to the North American continent from elsewhere. As in many high schools across the Western United States, Native Americans formed a small but

#1
*Long time ago
in the beginning
there were no white people in this world
there was nothing European.*

#2
*This world was already complete even
without white people*

visible part of the student population. I struggled to present the experiences of all immigrant and Native groups which became a part of these "United" States as an integral part of our collective story, yet I worried that the limitations of my own Euro-American background undermined my efforts to present minority perspectives in a natural, non-stilted way.

A clue as to how I might proceed was given to me by a Native American friend who insisted "the land still remembers..." The high school where I taught was located in an area which, a century before, had been subjected to intense mining activity. Seepage of poisonous substances from left-over mine tailings into the ground water continued to be a health hazard. By centering the Native American history unit on the very different relationship Native Americans had formed with the land, I was able to increase student awareness of how radically the balance between man and nature had been altered in the last century and a half. But this was not the same as getting in touch with the human experience of the Native peoples. For the telling of our collective story to be honest, I felt we had to deal more directly with the fact that Euro-Americans were not the first to set foot here. (see box 2; Silko, p. 133).

It is distressingly easy for an outsider to misrepresent or romanticize another culture. How does one go about explaining to others a culture of which one was not a part? Yet, if teachers do not introduce the Native American and other minority perspectives, then most U.S. students will continue to be left with the impression that American history was largely the tale of how Euro-Americans tamed the wilderness of the New World. So, although never quite satisfied with my efforts, I kept experimenting.

Even after leaving the high school to take a job with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival, I kept searching for a better way to approach cross-cultural learning. It was there that I found a powerful avenue which involved putting my teaching and theatrical experience together, the process of combining powerful literature with dramatic techniques in a workshop format to explore culturally-based experiences and perceptions. The specific workshop referred to at the beginning of this paper provides one instance of this process. By

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using it as an example, I hope to provide insight into how authentic literature and theatre process might be utilized in other settings to explore cross-cultural issues.

Rational for Theatre Process

The New York Times Book Review described Leslie Silko as “the most accomplished Indian writer of her generation,” citing her book *Ceremony* (1977) as “a splendid achievement.” The centrality of one’s cultural framework to one’s sense of identity is eloquently explained in Silko’s own words (p. 2):

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren’t just for entertainment
don’t be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don’t have anything
if you don’t have the stories.

Yet in conventional classrooms there is an unspoken assumption that engagement with the subject matter will only take place on the intellectual level. When discussion does extend to emotional levels there is

#3 *white skin people
like the belly of a fish
covered with hair.*

often resistance on the part of students. The instructor is seen as not having played by the “rules.” However, when a class is centered on the experience of acting it is understood that one must not only get out of one’s chair, but must engage one’s whole being in representing the character’s experience and motivations. By consciously taking on a role, the student takes on the burden of seeing the world in other than her accustomed way.

Throwing oneself bodily into the effort of imagination is especially valuable when one is being asked to leap a cultural chasm. To the children of the conquerors, Silko’s description of how another race might have viewed their forefathers has a certain shock value (see box 3; Silko, p. 135).

To fully appreciate the power of someone else’s story, one needs to go beyond the impressions left by passively experienced words. Intellectual discussion is put off in order to allow the literature to work directly upon the imagination. Dramatic presentation of the poem allows the images to move participants’ limbs and reverberate through their breath in a way that only occurs when one’s whole organism is involved in the attempt to communicate. Thus the performance of liter-

ature is used to cultivate what Arthur Miller (1987) referred to as the actor’s magical capacity to imagine, to collect within herself every mote of life since Genesis and to let it pour forth. Silko, p. 135:

They see no life
When they look
they see only objects.
The world is a dead thing for them
the trees and rivers are not alive
the mountains and stones are not alive.
The deer and bear are objects
They see no life.

An experiential approach enables the student to go beyond the descriptive and statistical frame of reference typical of the social sciences. Dramatic art is a tool uniquely suited to exploring the frontiers of social reality, for it enables the performer to express feelings which cannot yet be named with confidence. The power of dramatic presentation comes directly from communication of profound, subconscious, even un verbalized emotion. Within the workshop environment, the student is thrust into the role of actor, groping toward that dynamic unity of posture and speech, that living image which works like a harmonic, creating for both actor and audience an awareness which was not there before. The impact of such a presentation can be seen in the posture of the onlooker who responds viscerally, her body language often unconsciously mirroring that of the speaker (see box 4; Silko, p. 136).

By creating an “unreal” situation, very real emotions can be held up to the light and observed. Yet the self-discovery must remain incomplete if it is not tied to an exploration of the larger culture into which our individual lives are woven. Since the AEE workshop took place in the Front Range of the Colorado Rockies,

#4 **Poetry Meets History**
*The wind will blow them across the ocean
thousands of them in giant boats
swarming like larva
out of a crushed anthill.

They will carry objects which can shoot death
faster than the eye can see.*

where the confrontation between Native tribes and Euro-American immigrants had especially tragic results, the description offered by the poem could be compared directly to specific local events. Some workshop participants had driven part of the way through Lefthand Canyon,

named for an Arapahoe chief who had been killed in 1864, in the Sand Creek Massacre.

What put the Euro-American miners pouring in from the East on a collision course with the Native people? In the welter of historical detail we can easily lose sight of the insight Silko states so powerfully (see box 5; Silko, p. 136).

In 1851 the Treaty of Fort Laramie had promised to the Arapahoe and Cheyenne control of a large tract of

land, stretching some 200 miles east from the Rocky Mountains between the Arkansas and North Platte rivers. However, the Pike's Peak gold rush in 1859 brought an estimated 100,000 men, pushing wheelbarrows and handcarts, riding in farm wagons and prairie schooners, across the 600 miles of prairie which lay between the mountains and towns on the Missouri River such as Kansas City, Leavenworth, and Omaha (Leonard & Noel, 1990, p.23). These men knew nothing of the prior understandings between the federal government and the Native tribes.

Violence was not long in coming. Settlers soon began raising cattle and farm products to be sold to the mountain mining camps. They put up fences which disrupted ancient buffalo migration routes. With fewer and fewer buffalo to be found, some Indians began raiding ranches, killing or driving away the settlers' cattle and horses. Troops were sent after the Indians.

On November 29, 1864, the First and Third Colorado Cavalry attacked and massacred the peaceful Cheyenne and Arapahoe camped on the reservation set aside for them on Sand Creek, a tributary of the Arkansas River. In reprisal, all the Plains Indians rose up, attacking wagon trains, stage stations and isolated settlers. In Denver, people barricaded themselves in the mine, expecting the city to be burned, as Julesburg was in 1865. Volunteer troops escorted stage coaches and freight wagons to Denver to keep the city from starving. Eventually the end of the Civil War allowed regular troops to be sent west. In 1867, the Arapahoe were resettled on reservations in Oklahoma and Wyoming, and the Cheyenne were resettled in Oklahoma and Montana (Wagner, 1977, p. 17). Silko, p. 137:

Undoing the Legacy of the Past

Up here
in the hills
they will find the rocks,
rocks with veins of green and yellow and black
They will lay the final pattern with these rocks
they will lay it across the world
and explode everything.

Silko's theme, that people who see the world through the lens of fear will eventually destroy not only others but themselves, struck a deep chord among workshop participants. Immediately, questions arose: What are we to do about the invisible, internalized legacy of the past? How do we help the new generation growing up to perceive human diversity in terms of enriching variety rather than threat?

Till now, the power drama can have in affecting social consciousness has been most convincingly demonstrated by those who have made use of theatrical

effects to anesthetize and to paralyze. In an increasingly violent world, theatrical conventions have too often been used to distance onlookers, in order to keep them from reacting meaningfully to disturbing events.

In some eras and parts of the world, carefully staged violence has almost become an accepted part of political life. Speaking of Argentina during the 1970s, Diana Taylor (1990) observed:

Terrorism, with its scenes of torture and abductions, proved highly theatrical both on a practical and on a symbolic level. Terrorists dressed their parts and set the drama in motion. The victims, like actors, stood in (albeit unwillingly) for someone or something else. Antagonists appeared on the scene as if by magic; protagonists 'disappeared' into thin air. The revelation of corpses at the appropriate moment was as typical of terrorism as of the Elizabethan stage. Crimes became 'unreal,' invisible in their theatricality.

As Taylor suggests, terrorism draws on the power of theatrical methods to simultaneously bind and paralyze the audience. Yet, if theatrical conventions can be used as a way to increase the individual's sense of distance from events, these same conventions, used quite differently, may also become useful tools in helping us feel our way into more humane social relationships.

Carlos Fuentes (1991) speaks movingly of how insights gained through literature can help us to understand that history is not over yet, that the past must be re-imagined in the light of wisdom we have gained from subsequent events if the present is not to die in our hands. Tomorrow began 10,000 years ago, yet what we make of the traditions we have inherited will shape the face of the future. We are enabled to remake history because we have first imagined it. By employing dramatic techniques to make authentic literature accessible to students, we are helping to become a part of this on-going process.

The Approach in Practice

What are the practical processes one goes through and the issues one has to deal with in doing this sort of work? There are four key areas to focus on: 1) help students who may have little theatre experience to use their voices; 2) show how the roles people assume affect their self-perception; 3) engage the imagination of students to bring to life the literature; and 4) process participant reactions to the experience with a different cultural perspective. In the AEE workshop example, the aim was to help participants to explore the Native American viewpoint while at the same time teaching techniques which teachers could use in their own classrooms.

#5
*They will fear what they find
They will fear the people
They will kill what they fear.
Entire villages will be wiped out
They will slaughter whole tribes.*

Finding Your Natural Voice. The manner in which one uses one's voice for public speaking differs from one-to-one communication. Extra volume is needed, yet nervousness may result in contraction of the muscles of the respiratory/vocal tract, causing the voice to shrink to a whisper just when additional power and projection is needed. The voice then becomes "thin," "tight," or "whispery" instead of resonant. This adds to self-consciousness and makes it more difficult to engage the imagination. A useful exercise is to begin with everyone slowly running their voices from their lowest to their highest natural pitch, noticing where the voice sounds most powerful and resonant.

This exercise helps students discover their most effective vocal range, increases their awareness of when they stray out of this range, and helps them to recognize the extent to which their self-presentation involves an element of choice. This can serve as a first step toward recognizing that it is not valid to avoid self-reflection on one's habitual attitudes and presentation of self by saying "That's just the way I am." Also, since finding one's most effective vocal range tends to immediately make one feel more confident and relaxed, the exercise casts the prospect of change in a positive light. Students are left feeling both more confident about speaking in front of others and more open to the workshop's message.

The Psychological Effect of Social Roles. What does it feel like to be forced into a social role which makes you feel dissatisfied with yourself? For this exercise the class is split in half and asked to stand in two concentric circles. Those in the inner circle walk in a counter-clockwise direction, greeting each person in the outer circle passively, with a limp handshake and a mumbled greeting. Those in the outer circle are asked to greet those in the inner circle self-confidently, with a firm handshake and cheerful demeanor. Then they switch. Although the exercise is a simple one, students often feel the difference between the two modes of self-presentation very strongly. A short discussion after the exercise explores what it would be like to be forced into a social role which constantly puts one at a psychological disadvantage.

Feeling Your Way into the Poem. While the poem is chanted out loud, workshop participants are asked to shut their eyes and ask themselves, what does the narrator want? What feelings is this poem meant to elicit?

Forewarned that they will be asked to participate in a group performance of this work, participants are urged to strive for a clear sense of the feelings which lay behind the narrator's words. Then participants are divided into five groups, each taking a portion of the poem. Twenty-five minutes are allowed for each group to work out its interpretation of the assigned section.

When we reconvened at the AEE workshop, each portion of the poem was presented in turn. Presentation techniques ranged from a choral reading of the lines, Silko, p. 133:

they all got together
witch people from all directions
witches from all the Pueblos
and all the tribes.

to pantomime which replaced the words, p. 134:

Then some of them lifted the lids
on their big cooking pots
calling the rest of them over
to take a look.

The cumulative effect of the presentations was powerful as the workshop participants' insights were combined.

Naming Your Own Reality. Behind the innocuous words "minority" and "majority" lies a painful fact. Whereas members of the majority culture live in an environment in which their outlooks are similar to that of most people they meet (and thus comes to be looked upon as common sense), mem-

bers of minority groups often find they must continually battle misconceptions about themselves. The Silko poem gives powerful expression to a perception of the white race's impact on this continent which many Euro-American students at first find jarring. This opens the door to a recognition of what it means to be able to "name one's own reality." The exercise closes with a discussion of the value of actively examining the perceptions which lie behind one's hitherto unquestioned assumptions.

One Experience

We closed the AEE workshop at the Rocky Mountain Regional conference with a discussion of individual participant responses. The following sampling gives an idea of the range of reactions to this process:

It's like a cautionary thing to keep you from getting too far from the earth.

The realization that white people don't have a respect for life or nature, they don't see life in all that's around them. They've lost that aspect.

#6
Undoing the Legacy of the Past
*Up here
in the hills
they will find the rocks,
rocks with veins of green and yellow and black
They will lay the final pattern with these rocks
they will lay it across the world
and explode everything.*

I really like approaching it from a feeling level because I think too much of multicultural education is just real academic with facts and history and all of that.

The idea of having to act it out physically I think really makes you delve into the words.

I like that you can take it on different levels and look at it just as a story and act it out. Then there's the evil and witchery and the way they try to one-up each other. You can take that and expand it to other cultures and how it could be a metaphor for how cultures try to outdo each other.

We just talked about how these differences keep us apart and you tend to cling to your differences to keep yourself separate from other groups.

If I were doing this with students, I'd definitely have them draw the story after this.

I'd have a prop box when kids were acting this out and tell them "Here are some things you might want to use."

Surrounded by movies, television and rap music, participants come to such a workshop with a considerable knowledge of dramatic techniques. Since the aim is not to produce a performance which will be viewed by an audience beyond the class, the only acting instruction needed has to do with feeling one's way into the literature. Discussion centers on subjective experience, on what has been learned.

Using Theatre Techniques as Tools for Deepening Understanding

The AEE workshop session provides but one example of how performance techniques can be used to bring minority literature to life for students whose own cultural background might otherwise act as a barrier to understanding. The Silko poem was chosen for this workshop not only because its theme could be tied to specific local historical events, but also because most of the participants in this workshop were classroom teachers and the poem's dramatic content has a strong

appeal to young people. However, a wide range of literature could easily be adapted for such use, depending on the requirements of the situation.

Although we cannot change that past, we can weave back into the history the experiences and values of Native Americans and other minorities whose voices have too seldom been heard. In this way, we both enrich our own experience and help safeguard the future of the country we share. Groups of people whose true faces have long been hidden by layer upon layer of cultural stricture and cliché can begin to be seen in their full human reality. Having once experienced from the

"inside" something of another group's socially constituted reality, students can begin to build bridges of understanding. Future learning can be based on internalized experience rather than upon unthinking preconceptions, laying the groundwork for the sort of honest and open communication which can make meaningful social change possible.

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