

Longing & belonging

This article describes the workshop led by Patrice Baldwin at the AITA/IATA 16th World Congress, Drama in Education – 'The Magic Bullet', Schlaining Castle, Burgenland, Austria, 30th March – 4th April 2006.

Deciding my workshop theme for the AITA/IATA 16th World Congress was a bit of a challenge. Delegates from 22 countries would be attending and of course most were not working with English as their mother tongue. What drama could I develop with them that would be meaningful and accessible for all?

I eventually decided to work around the theme of leaving a homeland but I was not keen to develop a drama in which the reason for departure was war. I wanted to focus the drama on other reasons people might leave their homeland and the people and places they love. I wanted to explore the hopes and fears it evokes and the universal themes of longing and belonging. I did not want to fix the drama in a real time or place where it might seem too 'close to home' for some and have an already known narrative. I wanted the participants to explore and create the unknown rather than just re-enact the known. I was also sensitive to the fact that many of the delegates attending would have real life experiences of maybe reluctantly leaving homelands and that it was entering fragile territory for some. But I believe that drama always has to be about things that matter to the participants for them to fully engage and participants bring real knowledge and understanding to a drama, yet can distance and protect themselves through role.

I had originally thought my initial stimulus might be the image of a relevant, real statue or painting or possibly a short poem. I wanted to use the international accessibility of visual images and music to help the delegates access the theme and not rely too heavily on a stimulus that was language dependant. I searched the many refugee and asylum seeker sites on the internet, including sites that contained poetry written by refugees throughout history. The emotional universality of their plights in whichever country or time in history, shone through in their images and words. I was at the point of making a decision about how to start and which images to use, when I came across Shaun Tan's amazing new book, *The Arrival*.

The Arrival is a multi-layered, graphic novel that deals with the universal theme of migration, in a way that is internationally accessible as it is solely pictures. It seems like a battered old photo album in many ways and it has no words. It reaches out through evocative whole page pictures and storyboards in an almost cinematic way.

Finding this book was a 'Eureka moment'. It is a perfect stimulus for devising drama, highly engaging and with so much left unspoken for the 'readers' to imagine and create. I used just 3 images from the hundreds in this book, for four days and with four groups of delegates. Two of the three images may be viewed on Shaun Tan's website.



The Arrival is a migrant story told as a series of wordless images that might seem to come from a long forgotten time. A man leaves his wife and child in an impoverished town, seeking better prospects in an unknown country on the other side of a vast ocean. He eventually finds himself in a bewildering city of foreign customs, peculiar animals, curious floating objects and indecipherable languages. With nothing more than a suitcase and a handful of currency, the immigrant must find a place to live, food to eat and some kind of gainful employment. He is helped along the way by sympathetic strangers, each carrying their own unspoken history: stories of struggle and survival in a world of incomprehensible violence, upheaval and hope.

Each day the drama developed differently as it built on the responses of the participants. Since then, I have produced a full scheme of work around *The Arrival* called *Longing and Belonging* and it will feature in my next book (Sage 2008). However I would like to share the first morning of my workshop (Part 1 Leaving) in some detail now and outline the rest briefly.

Part 1 Leaving

1. Move if ...

In a class circle, move places if the statements as they are called out in turn, apply to you:

You have ever moved house

You have ever left someone you love behind

You have been in a country where you don't understand the writing

You have been in a country where you don't understand the language

You have ever been unsure whether you have a bed or not for the night

You have ever left possessions behind you that you would rather have been able to take

You have ever been treated with suspicion

You have ever felt like an outsider

This warm up activity linked personal response to some of the forthcoming aspects of the drama they were about to enter and they visually demonstrated to each other the personal relevance of the theme.

2. Why might people leave their homes and people they love?

Ideas were gathered through group discussion and then shared eg. war, unemployment, seeking excitement, divorce. These reasons can be categorised as internal and external reasons or a combination. They were told the drama was going to be about someone called Simon who was leaving his home and that it was not because of war.

3. The wonder game

I showed them the first full page picture of the man and woman (and I called them Simon and Mary)

standing by the table and said, 'I wonder what you wonder...' They then had opportunity to share what they were wondering. 'What are you wondering about in this picture?' Responses had to start ritualistically with 'I wonder ...' eg.

I wonder if Simon and Mary are both leaving.

I wonder who made the paper bird on the mantelpiece.

I wonder whose the third chair is.

I wonder if Mary is pregnant.

I wonder what he has in the suitcase etc.

These responses can be categorised in relation to character, setting, plot. They evoke curiosity and leave the narrative options open at the start of the drama. We can wonder without committing yet and pinning the narrative down.

4. Teacher in Role and Hot Seating

I asked if they would like to speak with either Simon or Mary (at a point just before the start of the book). I then went into role as either (but not both) to be questioned by them. The characters of Simon and Mary were improvised and over 4 days became clearer through the questions they asked and the dramas that evolved. Of course it is possible to create completely different characters and circumstances for the couple in the picture.

It is necessary to begin to develop the characters and plot, having heard what the participants are wondering. Teacher in role is one way of giving information that can help the drama unfold and deepen the participant's engagement.

'I hope that my book is 'read' as being partly about immigration, but also beyond any single social 'issue': it is intended to be more simply about the fact of changing circumstances as they inevitably happen in everyone's lives, and how people learn to adjust to and accept new situations, no matter how strange or disconcerting they at first appear.'

Shaun Tan June 2006

Simon has decided to leave and travel by ship to another land where he has been told there should be work for him. He is clever with his hands and used to work as a carpenter and then on the land but there is no longer work and no money for food. His only daughter Rebecca is 5. His decision to leave has been building up for a long time but something that happened yesterday made it suddenly clear to him that there is really no choice. But he's not sure how to tell Mary...

Mary is not sure if she is pregnant and has not told Simon she might be. Mary has a good friend Sarah, who sometimes gives her food. Mary takes in washing for very little money. She and Simon have known each other since they were children and love each other. She has never really been without him. She knows that it is likely that Simon will have to leave to get work and that she and Rebecca will follow later. If he decides to go they can only afford one passage so she would have to follow later when he has found work. She is feeling uneasy as since yesterday Simon has seemed very preoccupied...



5. Still image / small group play-making / freeze frame / Performance Carousel

In groups of about 4 they were asked to create a very short scene (no more than a minute) that portrayed a key moment that contributed to Simon's decision to leave. They were reminded that the scenes needed to remain universal and should not place this drama in any particular historical time or place.

The scenes across four days generated many possible events and moments that had led to Simon deciding to leave Mary and Rebecca and go to seek work in an unfamiliar country, eg.

No money for shoes for Rebecca

Suspecting Mary is pregnant and wanting to get work before a second baby arrives

The last food from the cupboard being eaten

A letter from his brother saying he has found work elsewhere and Simon should join him

Getting the sack

The school saying that they won't educate Rebecca any more as Simon and Mary can't pay

The series of sequences were then watched seamlessly in turn (as a Performance Carousel) and then re-enacted a second time in slow motion, without dialogue but accompanied by a soundtrack (*Sigur Ros, Track 1*) and a teacher narration telling the scenes as a story, eg.

'Simon looked at Rebecca's expectant face. He knew he could not buy her new shoes and he did not know what to say to her. He looked at Mary. He thought she was pregnant but she had said nothing. How could he provide for a second child when he could not even afford shoes or food for Rebecca? ...' etc.

This gave further time for reflection and enabled the audience/participants to focus on the visual and kinaesthetic elements of the scene and hear storytelling modelled that used their ideas. It brought group contributions back into the same, shared fiction.

Improvisation

Two volunteers then took on the roles of Simon and Mary and were asked to improvise from the moment just before Simon tells Mary he has decided to leave. The scene was very sensitively played.

Proxemics

After seeing the improvisation through once, the audience was invited to place themselves physically in relation to both characters, to indicate where their sympathies lay at this moment and explain why, eg.

'I am standing close to Mary as I know the pain and fear she must be feeling at this moment.' or

'I am standing almost between Simon and Mary as I feel equally for them both.'

'I am a little nearer to Simon than Mary because I think he has most responsibility and needs most support.' etc.

Talking objects

When Simon knows he will be leaving and possibly never returning, the objects in the room take on an additional significance. Which will he take and which will he leave? The objects can be seen as symbolic or memory laden and in drama we can talk with the objects in the room and let them speak to us and each other. They can become 'eye-witnesses' we can talk with about characters and past events.

We defined the space in the middle of the class circle as the room and in turn had opportunity to become an object from the picture, eg. clock, suitcase, cooking pot, paper bird, biscuit jar, chair, Simon's hat and coat, the cracked teapot, a child's picture. Shaun Tan singles out objects from the room and places them individually on an objects grid and in drama we single them out too and place them together.

Participants were invited to enter the circle, say what object they were and offer snippets of information, eg.

'I am the paper bird. Simon made me for Rebecca. If I could fly, I could go with him' and

'I am the tin that used to have biscuits in. All I have now are a few stale crumbs inside me. Will they ever put biscuits inside me again?'

Shaun Tan focuses our attention on similar and sometimes the same objects in different contexts throughout the book, eg. Simon's hat goes with him, a similar paper bird is made by Simon in the new land.

The hidden object /visualisation

Participants were asked to imagine that Simon was taking a small and significant object with him that he would keep about his person. They were asked to visualise it with eyes closed, know what it looked like in detail, know why its important to

Simon and then whisper quietly to someone, what it was and why it's important. They should be able to touch this imaginary object at different points in the drama and be reminded of its significance.

The hidden letter (shared writing)

I told them that Simon left a letter for Mary that he knew she would find after he had left. Each person had the opportunity to write one line of the letter on a paper strip. They were asked not to write the first or last line of the letter. We then read

aloud the sentences and negotiated the most effective order for them. The sentences hung together and collectively created the letter Simon left Mary, which was then read aloud, eg.

This is the hardest decision I have ever made. I will send for you and Rebecca as soon as I can. You must trust me. There is no other choice, I have to go. You know I love you and always will. Be strong while we are apart. I will send you bedtime stories on the wind. We will soon be together again as a family.

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A brief outline Parts 2 to 4



Part 1 of the drama took all morning. In the afternoon Part 2 of the drama started on board a crowded ship where there was little food and water and rumours and suspicion were rife.

Part 3 of the drama was the arrival. In groups the participants created sections of a propaganda film that all immigrants had to see before entering the country. All they had to base the scene around was a picture of the new land. Through the presentation of their propaganda scenes we learned about the 'ideal' land, about its transport and education systems, employment, worship, medical care, mealtimes, etc. Making the film was fun and lifted the sad mood evoked by the drama so far. There were wonderful ideas shared through scenes about birds bred to be public transport, education by pill, the underclass ('Shoo-shoos') who served the native people and lived out of sight underground, no sickness (and yet hospitals!), unusual foods etc. Each group was open to being questioned further by the rest of the groups in role as Simon and other immigrants, eg.

Immigrant Question: So is there any way a Shoo Shoo can live above ground?

Propoganda response: Oh yes! Shoo Shoos live above ground if they agree to take a pill that means they will forget their motherland.

Simon: What happens if I don't want my daughter to take an education pill when she arrives?

Propoganda response: Why would a loving father not want his daughter to be educated? Why waste time learning if she can just take a pill and know everything we do?

Immigrant question: If people are never ill here, why do you have hospitals?

Propoganda response: Because there are some people who think they are ill and so we take care of them.

Pictures of the new land can be viewed on Shaun Tan's website. It was not long before the 'ideal' presented through the propaganda film proved false, as Simon started to walk into scenes with other immigrants who had settled in 'Owlandia' and discovered the reality. However the drama moved on to show little ways in which Simon became accepted and

settled in, eg. invited to a meal at someone's house, giving directions to another immigrant who had more recently arrived, learning to write his name in the new language, etc. See the Shaun Tan website at www.shauntan.net



Thoughts from home

Simon receives a picture from Rebecca. Participants were asked to draw a picture that Rebecca might have sent her father. They placed the pictures Rebecca supposedly drew, upside down on the floor and then picked one up each, and receiving and interpreting the picture as if they were Simon.

Simon decides to write his first letter home and it crosses 'in the post' with Mary's first letter to him. The class divided into two groups and collectively wrote the two letters. Both letters are scribed (with no-one able to offer more than one sentence verbally at a time). This supported participants for whom English was not their first language. The letters are then read out in turn by a volunteer Mary and then Simon. When both letters have been heard, we discussed what we thought might be their future.



Alternative endings were then created by different groups as repeated, symbolic dream sequences (the subconscious at work imagining possible future outcomes). The music from the opening scene (*Sigur Ros, Track 1*) was used again as a background to this poignant, symbolic movement.

I would like to thank the workshop participants for their enthusiastic and thoughtful responses throughout the sessions.

References

Tan, S, *The Arrival*, Lothian books, 2006, ISBN 0-7344-0694-0:

Shaun Tan's website at <http://www.shauntan.net>.

To listen to an interview with Shaun Tan, talking about his book, *The Arrival* visit http://www.ozcomics.com/inConversation/inconversation_shauntan.html

To acquire the full scheme of work for *Longing and Belonging* keep your eyes open in 2008 for Patrice Baldwin's next book (being published by Sage publications).



Shaun Tan's website at <http://www.shauntan.net>.



Patrice Baldwin is Chair of National Drama and Adviser for Arts Development and Improvement for Norfolk County Council Children's Services. She is also national director of the D4LC initiative (Drama for Learning and Creativity). Her most recent books include, *With Drama in Mind – real learning in imagined worlds* (Network Continuum) and *Teaching Literacy Through Drama – creative approaches*. (Falmer Routledge).

