

The Power of Physicality

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Tahnae Luke is currently Head Teacher Creative Industries & Languages at Kurri Kurri High School with recent experience as a Drama teacher at Newtown High School of the Performing Arts. She has presented at numerous State and National Drama Conferences, is a HSC marker and has produced and directed shows bi-annually through the co-curricular program at KKHS and NHSPA. She has also completed her Masters of Educational Studies with Distinction majoring in Pedagogy, Leadership and International Comparative Curriculum. With a passion for transforming schools, Tahnae has been heavily involved in leading educational change through the 4C's at both KKHS and NHSPA.

Throughout my career, I have always been drawn to the physicality of theatre. Physicality has become my way in with theatre, growing from an upbringing in dance and a passion for competitive all-star cheerleading. There is so much power in being able to show a moment through a gesture, a glance, a movement or an all-out interpretive dance section. I am constantly intrigued by the non-naturalistic style and how, combined with other elements of design and styles, it forces the audience to consider what they are experiencing truly. This challenging nature to interpret the image, movement or moment highlights how we try to make sense of this world. The joy of theatre is that the audience enters a realm where they accept what is performed, and when physicality is added, they see another layer of tension, connection and meaning.

Allowing students to develop ways to use their bodies and encapsulate the mood and essence of a moment is at the core of my practice. I have explored different ways to build students confidence and skills in this area and what you read below is my backward mapping into how this is achieved.

Stage 4 – Introduction to Movement

I am fortunate to have Stage 4 classes for Drama and find this age to be the most inspiring in creative play, especially when you get them hooked before they become too cool for it. As a precursor to Physical Theatre, I develop students' confidence in learning how to move. From playing with Clowning to techniques in Melodrama, students are encouraged to go big with their possibilities. Through a range of examples from myself or through videos, students begin to be audacious with their choices which then collectively ups the ante for the class. I also firmly believe that students need to build a vocabulary to describe and analyse movement to assist with building acting and directing skills for future years. Due to this, I introduce movement through a short study of Rudolf Laban's 8 Efforts (Ewan, V. & Sagovsky, K. 2018) and Jacques Lecoq's 7 Levels of Tension (Lecoq, J. 2000). Through contrast, transference and characters, students begin to develop a clear vocabulary to describe their movements. This culminates in a reflection on their Four Seasons performance which asks them to represent the four seasons through a movement piece where each season is a different effort and level of tension. With a complete focus on movement and

encouragement to extend from the literal to the abstract for each season, students have shown a deep level of creativity and an increase in their confidence to use their bodies to create meaning.

Year 9 – Introduction to Physical Theatre

To perform with physical confidence, a deep trust must be formed between everyone in the classroom. Setting up a connected and safe environment is pivotal to devising and mainly relies on physical contact and connection. I cannot stress enough the importance of ensuring that rules are created to ensure safety for all. These include, no speaking while lifting or balancing, no laughing, no socks, and everyone needs to be ready and focused before starting. After teaching in several different contexts, it is always interesting how serious students take this, and they quickly realise the significance of these rules in ensuring everyone is safe.

To build trust quickly and in an enjoyable fashion, I always begin with a superman dive where students run and leap into the arms of the rest of the class. This enables everyone to work together, and everyone can succeed. Going in quick succession usually assists in encouraging all students to have a go, and the group acts as cheerleaders to help those with any fears. This has been successful in the contexts I have worked in. However, when deciding to do this, ensure you consider your context.

Once this positive, safe and trusting environment has formed, students learn a range of basic balances and lifts. As they build each of these skills, the class reflects on how each lift could be used theatrically. They discuss how it could create a moment and then use that to practice how they would transition in and out of the lift. Doing this straight away assists in showcasing how lifts and balances have to work authentically within a piece of theatre and need to be included for a purpose rather than just because they 'look cool'. Students also spend time creating symbolic tableaux to discover how to move from the literal to the abstract. This, along with their skills in lifts and balances, sets them up for a Physical Theatre performance based on a stimulus that ranges each year from a piece of music to a newspaper article or a poem. With a long history of coaching in competitive cheerleading and acrobatics, the skills are taught to clearly understand safe techniques and progressions. To start, I would recommend beginning with balances and thigh-high lifts. There are many incredible instructional videos on YouTube, and you can also show students clips of companies such as DV8, Legs on the Wall or Attraction for inspiration.

Year 10 – Introduction to Viewpoints

In Year 10, students base their devising unit through the lens of Viewpoints (Bogart, A. & Landau, T. 2004). Students are introduced to the nine physical Viewpoints; Spatial Relationship, Kinesthetic Response, Shape, Gesture, Repetition, Architecture, Tempo, Duration, and Topography (Bogart, A. & Landau, T. 2004). Students spend time learning about each of these individually through a range of practical exercises accompanied by an array of music and an abundance of reflection. Once students have the vocabulary and control over their movements, they move towards using these in a structured approach that Shane Anthony and Tina Mitchell (2017) use in their work called 'Offline' and 'Online'. The way I describe it to students is 'Offline' is thinking, planning,

sharing time, and 'Online' is doing. Combining this with a 'Recipe and Ingredients' system allows students to focus their work. For 'Recipe', I include time limits for 'Offline/Online' work, i.e. 10 minutes 'Offline', 8 minutes 'Online'. Keeping these relatively short forces students to focus and create. I also include roles for the group so that it supports the building of effective collaboration skills. For the 'Ingredients', I include different aspects of Viewpoints that need to be challenged and slowly bring other dramatic elements as they build their piece. These may include;

- A repeated gesture,
- Use the architecture in the room in a surprising way,
- Include a moment of super speed and one of slow motion,
- Use a tableau as your start and endpoint.

Once students have started in this process, the 'Recipe' develops to allow moments of editing/refinement, time to analyse feedback, time limits, and a stimulus. As students complete different versions of this practice whilst using the Viewpoints, the 'Ingredients' can become authentic to the group who can create their own goals for the lesson with their inclusion. Alternatively, it is a fantastic tool for groups that get stuck, sit down to discuss too much or are stuck in stereotypes.

This process and use of Viewpoints is an effective way to create large ensemble pieces as a Director. Creating whole pieces or moments of the ensemble are made easier with a structured process that gives agency and cohesiveness to the actors.

Year 11 – Frantic Assembly & Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime

By the time students reach Year 11, they have an array of experiences that help them develop their understanding of the power of physicality. This is enhanced through a Theatrical Traditions and Performance Styles study through the work of Frantic Assembly and the play *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Curious) (Stephens, S. 2013). Students learn about the non-naturalistic style of Frantic Assembly through *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* (Graham, S., & Hoggett, S. 2014). This easy to read resource is a staple for any Drama library as it explicitly describes the many activities they have created to enhance their style of work where they "Create new work that places an equal emphasis on movement, design, music and text." (Graham, S., & Hoggett, S. 2014. pp.6). By encouraging students to use their knowledge of Elements of Production and their Directing and Acting skills, students have shown a deeper understanding of how meaning can be created by merging all different forms of communication and innovation. Frantic's dismissal of labels and a clear vision of creating the unexpected ignites creativity and also supports it through a series of structured devising techniques. This creates room for "happy accidents" where a sense of play and improvisation is rewarded and celebrated. I also find immense joy and value in this unit as it encourages students to "look for new ways to see the world and new ways of telling the world what you think of it" (Graham, S., & Hoggett, S. 2014. pp.13). This is a powerful tool to develop them as theatre makers and as teenagers.

Students experientially learn through the different workshops from the devising book and the plethora of resource videos on YouTube throughout the unit. As a teacher, you are entering each classroom prepared for the unexpected, which is a thrilling and, at times, daunting place to be. The play is used as a support to the style of devising after students gain an understanding of *Frantic Assembly*. Enabling students to have creative freedom has resulted in devised scenes from *Curious* (Stephens, S. 2013) that are transformative, awe-inspiring and innovative. They have also shown the ability to challenge theatrical traditions ensuring all possibilities are considered.

Year 12 – Multi-Discipline Theatre – Complicite

By the time students get to Year 12, they have had a vast array of experiences in all styles and theatres, particularly building skills in physicality. Due to this, the perfect choice in Studies in Drama and Theatre is Multi-Discipline Theatre (MDT). Mirroring the study in Preliminary where students study *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* (Graham, S. & Hoggett, S.) and the play *Curious* (Stephens, S. 2013), in the HSC, students study the *Complicite: Rehearsal Notes* (Ainslie, S. 2010) and the play *A Disappearing Number* (Complicite & McBurney, S. 2007). Through this strategic choice, students' skills in physicality and their understanding of how to merge practice and a play into an essay is rewarded. Again, it also enhances their group devised piece as they are asked to create their piece of theatre throughout the MDT unit.

The exquisite *Rehearsal Notes* book (Ainslie, S. 2010) is a beautiful story of their process, practice and philosophy told through an array of photographs, objects and quotes. This unconventional way of illustrating their rehearsals is a testament to the style and techniques of *Complicite* that constantly pushes theatrical boundaries. What students take from this book is incredible, and their depth of understanding of the 3P's is created quickly. Throughout the process of examining the book a common theme is the sense of play;

“Do you want to come and play with us?” (McMullan, as cited in Ainslie, S. 2010. pp.59),

“In rehearsal, there’s a joyful mixture of work and play” (Ainslie, S. 2010. pp.65).

Going to the classroom to set up an opportunity for students to play is uplifting and also, at times, stressful as you feel you have so many checkboxes to tick. However, through persevering and allowing time for play, students have been able to go back to their inner child, fostering creativity and positive well-being.

As a hook event, I have the classroom set up with whatever random items I can find and ask the students to enter and just play. It is interesting to see the comparison of the first 10 minutes where they are reluctant to do anything but touch and notice what is in the place, to afterwards when they fully immerse themselves in the activity and laugh, giggle and create with absolute freedom.

A Disappearing Number (Complicite & McBurney, S. 2007) is a story of enquiry, discovery and heart. On the page, the numbers stream in torrents, but on the stage, the combination of technology, design and non-naturalistic structures tell a rich story and highlight the beauty in maths.

“A *Disappearing Number*. With touching emotion and unnerving disquietude, *A Disappearing Number* forces the spectator to consider the facts of love, death and belonging, within the space of his or her own personal universe” (Lalwani, as cited in Ainslie. S. 2010. pp.40).

There is a range of digital resources on the Complicite website and YouTube. However, the best resource is a filmed version of the play, which can be found on a few different streaming platforms.

Students push theatrical boundaries when playing with moments and exploring different ways to create the split era, scene, character and/or location. Having a deep understanding of movement and physicality from previous units enhances student experiences and their work. This is a joyous unit to teach as it allows you to build a sense of play in young people who, like adults, forget to be free of inhibitions. From experiential playing with possibilities with the text to exploring their ideas in their work, students develop sophisticated theatre-making skills, which sets them up for the Group Project in term 2.

Year 12 – Group Project

By the time students get to their final Group Project in Year 12, they have experienced the power of physicality through movement, Laban, Lecoq, Physical Theatre, Viewpoints, Frantic Assembly and MDT. This is not the exhaustive list of devising practices they have used, however these in particular set students up with a clear and strong understanding of how meaning can be made through physicality.

Teaching physicality is an enriching experience for teacher and student alike. The beauty in this focus is that it brings back the power of silences and reminds children that sometimes the best thing they can say is nothing at all. Getting to see students progress through each of the years and each of these units has highlighted how important it is to begin in the younger years building confidence in moving, playing and working in the abstract. This is at the core of my practice, and I implore everyone to include as many elements of physicality in their pedagogy as possible. It makes better theatre makers and creative students.

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