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'It could have been so much better': the aesthetic and social work of theatre

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It could have been so much better': the aesthetic and social work of theatre

I guess the performance was good because a lot of people complimented it, but personally, I didn't like it. The most important thing I think is not to get your hopes up too much, because I imagined so much more. But things turn out how you don't expect whether it be good or bad.

(Bertham, Middleview Student post - performance reflective writing addressed to international students, 12 December 2008)

Because even though rehearsal was hard at times, the performance shined greater than anything I could have imagined. (Erica, Middleview Student post – performance reflective writing addressed to international students, 12 December 2008)

You only have so much you can do and the rest is out of your control. I'm feeling the effects of five years. (Braeburn Teacher Interview, 11 December 2008)

It could have been so much better. (Middleview Teacher in post - performance discussion with researchers, 10 December 2008)

Researching drama as it unfolds in secondary classrooms in order to understand how theatre-making works, how youth engage, how creativity functions through relationships, how texts compel expression, how the body initiates and responds to ideas, how the instrumental and the aesthetic co-exist continues to fascinate and challenge those who do it. For understandable reasons, there is often a very celebratory tone to this kind of research. While there is a great deal to celebrate in drama classrooms, we have also begun to document a powerful 'melancholia' that can sometimes get papered over in our compulsion to advocate for the form and subject of drama

in schools. In our enthusiasm, drama gets assigned a great many important tasks: it engages the disengaged, it teaches empathy, it tackles difficult social issues, it democratizes classrooms, it radicalizes pedagogy. In our ethnographic research we too have such laudable goals, but here as well, there is a certain melancholia, as what is 'captured' is partial, halting, interrupted; and what is shared, a mere shadow of what was imagined or experienced.

Judith Butler (1997) takes up the Freudian concept of melancholia and differentiates it from mourning. Mourning, she explains, is the process by which the lost object or person is 'let go' and there is a break with it so that the new can begin. Melancholia, on the other hand, is the avoidance of this mourning process and subsequent 'letting go.' It is a taking of the lost object into the ego where it turns on itself and becomes hyper-judgmental. Freud (1923, trans. Angela Richards 1991, 254) explains, 'In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself'. Where this becomes useful for our purposes, in the exploration of what we have begun to understand as 'teacher melancholia', is in Butler's extrapolation that it is not just an object or person that may be lost but *an ideal*. Butler (1997, 196) says, 'the ideal may be 'lost' by being rendered unspeakable, that is, lost through prohibition or foreclosure: unspeakable, impossible to declare, but emerging in the direction of complaint and the heightened judgment of conscience'.

These features of melancholia seemed to us to be illustrated by a very specific moment during our fieldwork: the comment by a teacher-collaborator at Middleview that 'it could have been so much better'. 'It' was the public performance, at an arts assembly and in front of the whole student body, of a devised piece of theatre that the teacher had created with the students, and the comment came during a conversation we—the researchers—had with the teacher immediately following the performance. The comment seemed to us to have exactly those two

qualities of melancholia as Butler describes it: the loss of ideals and the hyper-judgment of the self. A sentiment had emerged as a judgment, but certainly a lot was unspoken. What ideals were at work, and why had the judgment been issued at this moment, following the performance at the assembly?

Of course teachers and students bring to the classroom a long list of ideals that mostly go unacknowledged, and we could choose to take up any number of these. For us, however, the most palpable ideals in this classroom were *aesthetic* and *social* in nature. We saw aesthetic ideals in the effort to create the conditions for powerful moments of performance, to learn the elements of craft, and to build a polished theatrical production for others to see. We saw social ideals in the desire for open, constructive critical discussion and in the hope that students would be present, engaged and committed to the work. Of course, we cannot say exactly what mix of these ideals the teacher's comment is lamenting. Was the 'it' that could have been so much better the performance that had just finished (aesthetic), or the whole project as a 'learning experience' (social)? In either of these cases, what exactly was 'it' limited by, and how did the teacher imagine that the limitations 'could have been' overcome? Does the 'so much' of the comment suggest a wide gap between the teacher's expectations and achievement? Lastly, what values or what evaluative criteria does 'better' involve? Better as a pedagogical experience, or better as an impactful piece of theatre? Better for the teacher, the students, the researchers, or the audience?

In this paper, our aim is not to analyze the qualities of melancholia itself, but instead to investigate its apparent cause: the many potential obstacles to achieving aesthetic and social ideals. We distilled our thinking down to two fundamental questions: (i) what factors limit student engagement and frustrate teachers' expectations for drama work? and (ii) what values or agendas are behind the pedagogy? These questions help us to pursue the 'back-story', that is, the

story behind the ubiquitous feeling of disappointment or what we have come to define more precisely as melancholia in our school sites. Toward the end of the paper, we more directly take up the second element of Butler's melancholia—the turning of judgment toward the self—by considering how the disappointment at not having attained some unspoken ideal may play out when drama work is 'handed over' to an audience for public judgment. We aim to theorize this notion of disappointment -in our art, in ourselves, in each other- a prevalent feeling in drama classrooms and one, we argue, that has much to teach us about the role of performance in drama classrooms and in research.

The Research Project

Urban School Performances: The interplay, through live and digital drama, of local-global knowledge about student engagement (USP) is an international research project that is examining, through attention to theatre contexts and practices in schools, how the relationships among culture, identity, multiculturalisms, student engagement and theatre have an impact on the lives of youth in schools and communities traditionally labeled 'disadvantaged' in the cities of Toronto, (Canada), Taipei (Taiwan), Lucknow (India), and New York City (USA).ⁱ This Canadian-led project brings together diverse cities to examine student engagement, theatre pedagogy and performance, and success at school from a local-global perspective and to illustrate how such a multi-site ethnography is changed by arts-based, participatory, and digital/performative research methods. Because the insights of youth about questions of engagement with school remains a central concern, this project seeks new ways to engage diverse youth in the research process, in the context of four communities equally concerned with 'raising the bar' for those students most disengaged from traditional practices of schooling.

Bringing the social and the performative together, *USP* is engaging youth, teachers and researchers in a creative inquiry, using digital-drama research tools (see Gallagher and Kim 2008), to better understand the relationship between engagement and the social, academic and artistic contexts of schooling. Given the importance of context in ethnographic research, we also examine the relationship between youth's sense of agency and the social structures and rules within which they operate in schools, in order to generate context-specific profiles of resilience and 'at risk'. Of particular interest to studies of theatre and pedagogy, we are determining the nature and quality of the relationship between achievement in drama/theatre and school engagement by closely examining the pedagogies particular to the collaborative processes of theatre-making. In other words, the research project is concerned with how young people 'perform' - socially, academically, and artistically- in school contexts situated in marginalized communities. The research therefore examines both the *cultural and everyday performances* and the *artistic performances* created by youth in the particular context of drama lessons.

As noted above, the 'goals' for the project are ambitious; the educational problems that inspire them are complex and pressing. The research is, in a sense, burdened with expectation. What are we setting ourselves up for? Without doubt, new and important understandings will be gleaned, but the educational contexts in and problems on which we have been working- ones familiar to applied theatre practitioners and researchers- place a heavy burden on what theatre pedagogy and performance can reasonably accomplish. We hope, in this paper, to unapologetically point to a few of those shining moments we have already witnessed in the context of our study, but also to reveal the shadows, and to draw an interesting parallel between the expectations students and teachers have of theatre pedagogy and performance in the (fraught) world of schools and those held by researchers who are similarly and simultaneously beguiled

and dissatisfied by what dramatic form and ethnographic research can and cannot accomplish. We are specifically talking here about the *aesthetic-* and *social- work* undertaken in the context of the drama/theatre classroom and how we come to know that through ethnographic study.

To further pry open this unrelenting theme of ‘disappointment’, we turn now to some of the educational problems outlined for us by youth in the first stage of our research. The following data come from the collective fieldnotes of four researchers and the preliminary interviews in the two Toronto sites. We have aimed to observe forms of both engagement and disengagement in our sites and have asked the youth in our study to help us identify those aspects of learning with/through theatre that help and/or hinder their engagement with school generally and processes of theatre-making specifically.

Educational contexts, the burden of advocacy, and the dangers of othering

First, to the advocacy terrain: the prevailing wisdom about drama/theatre classes in schools suggests that it engages the disengaged, it reaches all students, and it creates trusting, caring, and empathic classroom environments. There are countless studies, too many to name, that qualify these attributes. We have no dispute with these studies, only that certain educational contexts in conjunction with the on-going assault on arts funding and support has made it more difficult to talk about the ‘failures’ of drama, the ways in which it, too, has fallen short both pedagogically and artistically. Let us start with the educational landscape for the ‘kinds of students’ and the ‘kinds of schools’ in which our team of researchers is working. We judiciously use quotation marks here because we are acutely aware of the ‘othering’ atrocities we are always on the verge of committing. A word of caution from bell hooks who always lays it fittingly bare:

Often this speech about the “Other” annihilates, erases: “no need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell

it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speak subject, and you are now at the center of my talk”. Stop. (1990, 151-2)

Part of our research, then, becomes a project in de-centering ourselves in the interest of opening channels of communication -through performance and through dialogue- among youth theatre-makers, teachers and researchers in diverse contexts. To simply put people in communication with each other in no way guarantees this desired de-centering. It does, however, require that we become more intentional about the ‘how’ of communication. Too often, ‘interpretation’ acts as a kind of foreclosure on both the performance and the event of dialogue. Here, we are inviting interpretation that keeps in dialectical interchange the interests of context in the analyses of the aesthetic and the social of drama work, not necessarily as explanatory qualities but as dialogic opportunities to ask different questions of the performances we create.

If youth engagement is our interest (of the presumed disengaged youth in these contexts) and theatre claims to powerfully and differently engage its participants, then we seem to have set our research in quite the perfect context. But engagement through performance, as we have begun to understand, is an ambiguous and variable concept. It may also point to some of the ways in which disengagement is strategic, intentional, rather than a simple sign of extrication. In the last two decades, the concept of engagement in education has received increased attention in the scholarly literature. First, it has been regarded as a way to explain low levels of academic achievement, generalized boredom at school, and high early leaving rates. Second, since it is presumed to be malleable, it is regarded as a field of potential for policy intervention aimed at increasing student success (Fredricks et. al, 2004). Notwithstanding this interest, it is less clear, at the conceptual level, what ‘student engagement’ means or looks like, and how best to

meaningfully and accurately describe it.

What values or agendas are behind the pedagogy?

We perform to stay alive.

Dwight Conquergood (cited in P. Anderson, 2007, 816).

How do teachers and students use performance and pedagogy in imaginative collaborative work that engages the economic, historical, political and geographic forces active in their lives? It is from this complex interaction of learning, teaching and historical context that pedagogy emerges. From our early observations and experiences in the two sites, the basic question before us was: how does the intersection of ideals and judgment limit pedagogy?

As to values and agendas, our two research sites—Middleview and Braeburn—presented two radically different scenarios to us. The teacher at Middleview demonstrated her profound care for her students' personal and social well-being. There is no doubt that she values drama work for the extent to which it inquires into, and provides an outlet for, her students' private and public stories and struggles. For the teacher at Braeburn, that kind of social work was happening, but was incidental to the goal of producing a polished production of a musical (*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*). In this way, the early fieldwork presented two scenarios to us: the classroom that instrumentalizes drama in an effort to carry out some social function, and the classroom that activates theatre as a craft and vocation in an effort to produce an effective performance.

We were not long in realizing that this easy aesthetic/social split was a seductive but inaccurate description of a more complex reality. Both teachers understood their own work as including both of these agendas simultaneously. As noted, the teacher at Middleview was

overwhelmingly concerned with the students' personal and social struggles. But there is good reason to think that she also wished her performance to be 'better' as theatre. In ways both overt and subtle, *theatre* was evoked in the classroom as more than an instrumental set of skills which are understood (by tacit agreement) as a vehicle for social change. It was that, but it was also a wider vocational, professional, and artistic community in which the classroom lived. While she was struggling on a daily basis with the many personal and institutional distractions and conflicts in her classroom and school, she made a clear effort to share her own connectedness to theatre in Toronto by keeping them conscious of the wider theatre community and by organizing regular trips to see local performances. Of course, feeling a sense of membership in these wider communities was not a given; on one memorable occasion the group spoke angrily about how poorly they had been treated by a theatre's staff during one of their field trips. Again, another example of how students experience the fluidity of the 'social' and the 'aesthetic' in their theatre studies.

From our initial months in our sites, we have witnessed the social and the aesthetic of drama teaching and learning at times in fierce exchange and at other times in an intimate tête-à-tête. This is perhaps as it should be. The fluidity between the two, however, raises both pedagogical and artistic questions regarding disappointment and melancholia: (i) is there a drama teaching that more skillfully and consistently moves towards 'artistic' products?; (ii) what are the merits and limitations of a performance pedagogy? and (iii) how does the performative operate with students who perceive themselves as stable identities which can, ultimately, be antithetical to learning? As Helen Nicholson (2005, 65) has suggested, 'The idea that identity is a continual process of *becoming*, rather than a pre-given expression of *being*, has involved a reconsideration of the concept of narrative and its significance in everyday life'. In other words, what pedagogies

might nurture a learning self that is not a fixed entity but instead an emergent process of becoming, an evolving work in progress? In addressing teacher and student disappointment with performance pedagogy, we are also exploring what this disappointment may mask and how it might shed light on the complexities of teacher and student learning in urban theatre classrooms.

Performance and Performative Pedagogy in the Social and the Aesthetic: moments of success

Increasing theoretical attention is also being paid to the relationships between space, youth, and social relations (Gallagher 2007), particularly in the field of critical geography (see Mitchell 1994, 2002; Moje 2004; Soja 1996, 2004; Massey 1998; Hull and Katz 2006; Hull and James 2007). Massey (1998, 124) has argued that when thinking about youth culture in spatial terms, space is organized in terms of ‘a vast complexity of interconnections’. The theoretical frames of our project draw primarily from critical ethnography (see Lather and Smithies 1997; Britzman 1991; Yon 2000), and critical theories of schooling (see Anyon 2005, 1997; Thomson 2002; Apple 1999; McLaren 1986; Bernstein 1996). These works engage a socio-cultural perspective of schooling where youth experiences of social exclusion/belonging, of school success generally, is understood within the context of a series of related and interdependent elements. In addition to the growing body of work on ‘applied drama/theatre’ generally (see Nicholson 2005, O’Connor, O’Connor and Welsh-Morris 2006; Dalrymple 2006; Nogueira 2006; Munier and Etherton 2006), much research and theorizing in the drama education literature- located in schools- has also significantly turned towards a socio-cultural theoretical orientation (see Ackroyd 2006; Dickenson and Neelands and Shenton Primary School 2006; Nicholson 2005; Neelands 2004).

The pedagogical choices of the learning spaces, the daily agenda and various texts, for the classes in our two Toronto sites differ and reflect the different politics and commitments of the two teachers. Both teachers had different ideas about the use of the drama classroom as a social space. In Middleview, Ms. S.'s [*White, Female, Jewish, Canadian-born, teacher*] classroom was open and responsive to the outside world. Social issues were invited in and became the spine of dialogue, writing and improvisation. The following fieldnote reflects the elastic agenda that always made room for issues of concern that the students brought into the class from their lives:

Improvisation as spontaneous tool of social exploration: As we are setting up our equipment, out of the corner of my ears I hear a discussion going on that is really engrossing to the students. It sounds like a TV show plot but they say later that it's true and involves one of them. When Ms. S. comes into the room, they start to talk to her about it. Then Bell says "let's act it out". They get to their feet and try to assign parts. It's rough and chaotic trying to figure out the complex interrelationships of the story but it has to do with deception and an extramarital love relationship. The improvisation focuses on a friend who needs to talk to another friend about what she knows about this supposedly secret relationship. Ms. S. tries to use forum theatre to get input from the larger group. It is not conclusive in any way but I was so struck by how drama has become a vehicle for them to discuss the issues that affect them. It seems like improvisation as a form of dialogue is almost as comfortable to them as discussion. Drama has become an embodied and collective/collaborative tool to explore and deliberate about what to do with the complexities they face. (Fieldnotes, Middleview, 24 November 2008)

Moments such as these also illustrate Helen Nicholson's (2005, 38) notion of a 'performative pedagogy' that is responsive and acknowledges that the source of knowledge rests in the students themselves. This 'performative pedagogy' is continually oriented towards an 'open state of becoming' (46) and is 'negotiated, planned and focused according to different contexts and situations' (40). Ms. S.'s approach does not define good and bad choices; instead, she listens,

adds her own opinions, and models what Joe Winston (2005, 318) would describe as the ‘induction of students into the moral life as opposed to straightforward moral instruction’.

At Braeburn, the implicit understanding of space and its pedagogical possibilities is quite different. Ms. C. [*Female, White, straight, middle class, Jewish, teacher*] describes a ritual ‘slap on the wall’ that signifies that the outside world does not penetrate the walls of the class. She asks her students to ‘leave life outside the room and come into this totally safe space’ (Braeburn Teacher Interview 4 December 2008). We would question how ‘totally safe’ any such space could be, but rather than judge the choice, we choose to regard this as a pedagogy with different possibilities. Nicholson (2005, 125) writes about the ‘empty space’, a space freed from the outside world in order to liberate creative work. She connects this to the modernist movement that aimed at social transformation by cutting itself off from the ‘corrupt and false social world outside’ (Davis Wilde, cited in Nicholson, 125). In fact, it was clear to us that this conception had significant advantages for Peanutⁱⁱ (*‘Female, Latina, straight, high class, Christian, Toronto, Canada born, English first language, Spanish spoken. Caring, open hearted, funny and outgoing. Would like to be described by the researchers as: ‘This student is amazing. She is kind, caring and funny’.*). She described the classroom as the place that allowed her to return to her younger, more innocent self that loved to dance before being weighed down by a demanding addiction. In the classroom, Peanut was not seeking to understand the social forces that acted upon her to push her towards substance abuse, she was trying to elude that self and ‘stay sober.’ (Focus Group Interview 1 December 2008). In other words, the aesthetic space trumped the social space for Peanut. Or might we say, the aesthetic space opened onto a different kind of social space that did not overtly attempt to *do* any social work, but accomplished this nonetheless.

In Ms. S.'s class, the social world of the students becomes the devised text while Ms. C. teaches 'craftsmanship' through the set texts of music, choreography and scenes. Our following analysis lends empirical strength to these importantly different pedagogical conceptions in drama.

Joe Winston (2005, 318) points to the use of symbol that 'is, by its very nature, suggestive rather than prescriptive and operates by refusing to name that which it might represent' (320). At Middleview, Ms. S. began devising by introducing the symbol or metaphor of 'the door'. To encourage multiple interpretations, she asked the students to free-write using 'the door' as a prompt. Improvisation and bringing in artefacts associated with doors became the stimulus for further free-writing in subsequent classes.

The piece performed at the school assembly began with the words, 'a door is a metaphor' and comprised a number of interconnected student-composed pieces. One female student's monologue spoke of her worry that the door to heaven would be closed to her because she loved a woman. Another piece addressed the issues of immigration and the doors that are shut to people with qualifications from other parts of the world that are not recognized in the new country. A third piece began with the opening of a door to the new home of a daughter, mother and the mother's boyfriend; though the family hoped the new home would be fresh start for all of them, the door quickly shut as the daughter faced the boyfriend's abuse. The play closed with each of the students coming on to the stage offering different meanings: 'a door is: a transition, a new possibility, a change, an ending...'

At Braeburn, the choice of performance texts were the songs and teacher-designed choreography for *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. The students were instructed in singing, starting with technical exercises followed by songs from the Broadway musical. They

were asked to form lines and began practicing the teacher-designed choreography. During the break, students would practice steps and teach one another what they knew. The enjoyment some students took in the singing and the dancing was palpable while others seemed disengaged, making only a modest effort or the performance of an effort. The final performance happened in the school's 'cafetorium'.

In both of these spaces, there were moments of success or satisfaction resulting from the very different pedagogical choices made by the two teachers. In other words, disappointment does not signal the absence of 'success'; these two seemingly incompatible experiences, or senses, often overtly co-exist.

Disappointment creeps in: What factors limit student engagement and frustrate teachers' expectations for drama work?

Disengagement, according to teachers at both sites, has much to do with 'attendance problems'. This is also explained by teachers and some students at Braeburn as 'addiction problems', or the particular realities of 'at risk' youth:

At the end of the class we had a conversation with Ms. C. When we complimented her about the kinds of positive and thoughtful feedback the students were able to give, she mentioned that starting from day one they have been emphasizing the importance of providing positive, productive feedback. We also learned that these students were the ones who really wanted to stay in this class. Initially there were 64 students, but almost half of them had already dropped the course. She explained that it is 'normal' for this many students to drop a course at Braeburn. She told us that attendance is a big issue at Braeburn. She also mentioned that some of these students come with a history of addiction and violent behavior. (Fieldnotes, Braeburn, 27 October 2008)

This information was corroborated in our first youth focus group at Braeburn by Peanut, a student who so clearly benefited from the pedagogical space Ms. C. aimed to create, one that might be characterized as intentionally divorced from the ‘real world out there’:

Peanut: I think that it can get even more personal like -just like people taking about you– or whatever. For me... I’m opening up now. I struggled with addiction for a long time and I and I’m just starting to get myself together and that’s a – that brings me down. You know sometimes I can’t come here and all I can think about is: stay sober, go to school, stay sober, go to school; you know, that’s all I have. It is not always just about people talking about you, or like [the lack of] the bus fare right? It is about struggling with your inner self. And drugs. And just like - not being able to find that push, right? I found that here. I know I have that privilege here. (Braeburn Focus Group Interview, 3 December 2008)

The day-to-day, ‘out of school’ realities of many students in our schools militate against their engagement with school. But in addition to these rather more obvious barriers, we have begun to take note of the ‘performances’ of engagement/disengagement that we are privy to in the day-to-day that tell us a great deal about the stakes of engagement for some youth in schools:

Feels a bit like he’s walking a line between engagement and disengagement. Like he floats at the periphery of the class’s attention, and steals himself away to participate. Like his participation can’t be noticed, has to be subtle. When he volunteered to write down the rules, he just walked over and started it, didn’t make a scene, and was not sure anyone really noticed. (Fieldnotes, Middleview, 3 November 2008)

What made this student’s engagement a kind of performance was the way it seemed to be conscious of an audience; it was not ‘theatrical’ performance that made a show of his move to participate, but a social performance that allowed the student to both participate and appear disengaged at the same time.

It seemed to us that each student's relationship to her/his unique set of learning limitations varied on a daily basis. The same student who would make a thoughtful contribution to the work on one day would sabotage it the next. On a third day, he might not come to school at all. So often, as researchers, we are staring anger and despair in the face as we watch teachers and students attempt to make creative use of these complex emotions and fraught experiences. And we sometimes find ourselves watching and thinking: 'it could have been so much worse'.

Post Performance Reflection: how do we measure success?

Ms. C. at Braeburn said that the primary and most enduring learning from performance for the students is the completion of a task. The very fact that they finished something they started represented significant learning. Recall that in both sites, attendance was cited as the main obstacle to learning.

Ms. S. at Middleview also pointed out that performance teaches social skills and critical thinking in the form of problem solving, 'I think this gives kids certain valuable skills like teamwork and problem solving' (Middleview Teacher email post-performance, 15 January 2009). Another pedagogical advantage to performance, offers Ms. S., is the pressure involved that pushes students to work harder and this ultimately leads to a greater degree of satisfaction, 'Having a higher stake goal like a performance also gives students a greater sense of satisfaction from their work'.

Reflecting on the performances, the teachers in both sites commented on the poor conditions in which they had to work. At Middleview they lost almost a whole week of rehearsals because their classroom had flooded and they were bounced around from a Science

Lab to an English classroom that was so hot that several fans had to be running at all times. In the auditorium, the acoustics were poor and the stage had relatively ineffective microphones. The acoustics were challenging in the Braeburn cafetorium too, as the ‘performance space’ was filled by hundreds of students eating their lunch. The blocking was compromised because the students were forced to cluster around two microphones on each side of the stage in order to be heard by the audience.

After the performance of *Joseph* at Braeburn, the music teacher expressed his disappointment that twenty of the forty students they began with were not on stage (although they made an 11th-hour effort to incorporate a few who did show up unexpectedly just prior to the performance, to help them salvage their credit). Performance success at Middleview, as at Braeburn, was partially measured in terms of the number of students who showed up. Here, the number of students who did not participate was four out of fifteen. Nonetheless, at Middleview, the teacher felt the performance was a success:

I thought that overall the project was very successful both artistically and pedagogically. Ideally, all the students would have been engaged and perhaps I could have done more to make that happen but the good thing is that it created an opportunity for the majority of the students to be very engaged and that is positive. The failure was that Stephanie, Bonnie, K’Thanie and Fabian, did not participate in the performance. (Middleview Teacher email reflecting on performance, 15 January 2009)

She goes on to say that while she initially thought of the lack of attendance and ‘buy in’ as a failure, she later thought of it as a need for more learning on the part of individual students, ‘But is that a failure or something for their own learning? I’m not sure. It’s been hard getting them to do very much at all this year--Bonnie and Stephanie hardly come to school’ (Middleview Teacher email post- performance, 15 January 2009). This significant question leads us to

wonder, what is the place of such ‘personal work’ in learning and how might pedagogies better acknowledge this? Or, indeed, how do teachers separate out their own teaching successes and failures from those successes/failures for which they cannot be responsible?

Performance Pedagogy: closed identities and melancholia

What we came to understand as ‘closed identities’ had significant impact on individual students and the collective groupⁱⁱⁱ. At Middleview, in the first focus group interviews, the students recognized the social tensions in the class and reflected on their own contribution to them:

Bella: [‘Female, Black, straight, middle class, Seven Day A. (religion), St. Vincent born, English first language. Would like to be described by the researchers as: Chilling, low back, outgoing at times, love to have fun with family, friends. She’s her and nobody else’.] It’s a drama class, for real. Like an actual drama not just drama, drama. It’s drama, like capital D-R-A-M-A, drama.

Quotations!

Derek: [‘Male, White, straight, upper middle class, religion N/A, Toronto, Canada born, English first language. Would like to be described by the researchers as: outgoing striving for success that will be fulfilled and energetic’], (After being interrupted) Okay, let me talk. (Bella laughs.)

Everybody was like pretty mellow [talking about his drama class last year] and like did what they were told [he gestures with his pen as if it’s a teacher’s pointer or concert master’s baton] and this year it started out kinda hectic and people were, including myself, a lot of it had to do with me, but everybody was disruptive and just, like I think we were all bored. And then it just started to ‘shave’ when we got it together and now it’s like progressing.

Bella: Yeah, it’s so hard for us to click in this drama class. And another problem, I just don’t know, they take stuff like way too seriously. Like if Derek makes a joke, they’re like, ‘shut the hell up.’ Like if he swears or whatever, they get all offensive. And I’ll be like, ‘Okay, you can’t get offensive to him, that’s just how he is.’ Like me and Fabian, how we get along, we argue. We

cuss each other out constantly, that's how we get along. You can't get mad at us 'cause that's just how we are.' (Middleview: Student Focus Group Interview, 24 November 2008)

Nicholson (2005, 46) stresses that pedagogy is a 'performative encounter, rather than a meeting of fixed positions'. But fixed social positions that the students described to us make the work of devising in the classroom difficult, as students hold on to confirmed and seemingly stable characteristics about themselves: 'You can't get mad at us 'cause that's just how we are'. When students categorize their identities as bounded and stable, it often appeared to us as a resistance to learning something new or a protective shield of sorts, or both. Bella's behaviour was not without consequence and in one class it left her classmate, Carmen, in tears as Bella upstaged her during her monologue. Ms. S. tried to address Bella's actions on several occasions but this mantra of 'just being who I am' persisted. It is not only the 'becoming' of poststructural theory that is at stake here, but students' own self-conception/narratives and the ways in which certain strategic identities afford them a kind of power in the classroom dynamic or the freedom to not learn.

This 'lost opportunity' for learning—the failure to achieve some unspoken social ideal—leads to the experience of melancholia for teachers, students and researchers. The invitation to co-compose has been issued, but the composition remains unfinished. Are we seeing the limits of pedagogy? Are we colliding with the reality that social conditions often too greatly impact a student's ability to attend and engage? How do youth develop the tenacity to wrestle with the forces at work that hold them back? Could part of the disappointment in this work have little or nothing to do with drama or pedagogy but rather with the sheer scope of the forces that pull students away from learning and the exhaustion that overcomes the teacher who, despite having done everything she can, still feels powerlessness in the face of these complex social issues?

To be sure, in these and many high poverty urban school contexts, teachers are up against social and economic problems and they feel, or are made to feel, ineffectual. This is a discouraging scenario to be forced to repeat year after year. But might there be something more at play? What would happen if we were to accept the incompleteness, the impossibility of the process? Would some of the disappointment go away? What do we gain/teach/learn from this disappointment? Does this impossible and unreachable standard warrant a different kind of exploration?

This is hugely important because the *implicit* goals of teachers remain largely unexplored in the study of pedagogy. What are teachers trying to achieve outside of the prescribed curriculum? And in theatre, what social work overlays the aesthetic work? Do teachers (and especially those working in schools in challenging circumstances) experience melancholia because there is something lost -some possible redemption that is not achieved- in this wistful ‘it could have been so much better’? Butler points to the unarticulated and in this paper we have attempted to expose the unexpressed that overlays the successes and the failures of performance and performative pedagogy. The teachers in both sites were exhausted by the experience of creating theatre with their students; it was difficult for us to see such devoted and careful work being weighed down by the perceived ‘failures’ on both the social and the aesthetic fronts.

Could implicit but unexpressed ideals force teachers to turn on our/themselves in relentless judgment? Or is it the case that the ego (the teacher?) fears that it will be unseated by the id (the students)? Is there a fear that the id (the unconscious) ‘will out’ (Freud 1923), and we may, none of us, be able to tolerate the unleashing of the id in these complex and overburdened urban school contexts? Might the super-ego (the researchers? the school?) stand in judgment of the perceived failures and unachieved ideals? We leave the real psychoanalytic work to those better

equipped to do so, but there is certainly something here worth pursuing. Butler (1997, 194) carefully contrasts unending melancholia with mourning, that in ‘the breaking of attachment, inaugurates life’. How can disappointment act as an invitation to question, an invitation to new learning, invention and becoming? What might be the ways that we, as teachers and researchers, hold onto practices that pale in the face of these unarticulated ideals? How can we give words to these ideals, to open them up and air them out in order to figure out what drives us and drives us to despair?

Aesthetics, Audience and Lost Ideals: A Reprieve

Filch: In view of Her Coronation,
Her Majesty Has decreed
That the prisoner Macheath
shall at once, forthwith, be Freed! (Hurray!) [...]
Macheath: Repriev—ed! Re-prieve----ed!

- *The Threepenny Opera*

(Weill, Brecht and Blitzstein 1984, 52-53)

Ms. S.’s choice to present her original creation in front of the whole school population made her theatrical objective clear and present, and certainly amplified some of the ongoing challenges and interpersonal conflicts she was negotiating. For the researchers, it became interesting to observe students navigating the teacher’s multiple objectives. What was the value of this work for the teacher, and what ideal outcomes might she have imagined? How about for the students?

What happens when teachers put drama work with a strong pedagogical focus in front of a large, public audience? How does the public presentation change the nature of the work

altogether? How is the audience seeing the work (or how is it understood to *be seeing*), and how does this affect the creative process and pedagogical intent? If drama work is burdened with pedagogical expectations, does presenting the work in this way add a set of theatrical expectations? Is it possible to even separate out these expectations? In *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings*, Anthony Jackson (2007, 1) discusses the ‘tension between theatre as education and theatre as ‘art’: between theatre’s aesthetic dimension and the ‘utilitarian’ or ‘instrumental’ role for which it has so often been pressed into service’ Jackson places a lot of faith in the benefits of public performance, noting that a play’s ‘effect on [...] pupils’ attitudes and behavior’ derives much from its ‘complex, multi-layered and interactive (or dialogic) impact on [...] audiences’.

There are some potential benefits. As Ms. S. noted earlier, the pressure of having to present a ‘product’ to a school community places pressure on the work, ‘raising the stakes’ for the students and teacher alike. Performing in front of an audience is a special embodied learning experience that one may not be able to simulate in a classroom. Having work culminate in a performance can also generate a feeling of accomplishment and ownership among the participants, especially when the work was an original collective creation.

But how might an audience change the nature of the work altogether? There are many instances in theatre history of theatre artists pursuing ideologically-driven artistic projects that seemed to be at odds with prevailing audience expectations. Brecht pursued a project of intellectual and political engagement that was to some extent at odds with his audience’s expectation that his theatre would entertain. *The Threepenny Opera* presents a compromise. At around the same time in Canada, the educator and visionary director Herman Voaden was developing his ‘symphonic expressionist’ aesthetic that was absolutely different from the plot-

driven realist-naturalist theatre that dominated the Canadian stage in his time. Voaden too, compromised, with his later *Murder Pattern* striking a balance between a poetic, expressionist aesthetic and a plot-drama about a murder in small-town Ontario. Perhaps both Brecht and Voaden were all the while just trying to make ‘better’ theatre; but the point here is that whatever work they may have done in studios or drama classrooms ultimately had to become something different when presented to big public audiences.^{iv} The set of expectations the audience was bringing in each case was different, affecting what the work could be. This gap between the envisioned and the possible is familiar. Our teachers, too, wished for an audience (the public, the researchers) to appreciate what was produced by these students given the myriad constraints. But they also wished for the work to stand on its own. At Braeburn, the teacher might have been very happy had the work *entertained* her public. At Middleview, the teacher might have been very happy had the work *disturbed* her public. In both cases, the familiar sense of disappointment set in.

Exactly how aesthetic or pedagogical intentions met/anticipated audience expectations was different in each of these historical examples, and is quite different again in our research context. Inner city Toronto is not Berlin in the 1930s, nor is the auditorium of an urban school the same kind of performance space as the *Theater am Schiffbauerdamm* (where *Threepenny* premiered in 1928). Certainly, there may be a general expectation that the performance should be effective (or entertaining?), adding an element to a pedagogical equation that is otherwise mainly valued for its personal and social benefits.

We end here with a reflection on audience not because, in either of our schools, the ‘final performance’ was especially auspicious. In fact, the public performances seemed both climactic and anti-climactic all at once. The importance of *being seen* was obvious for the students, of

having their ‘hard work’ or ‘achievement’ or ‘talent’ witnessed. But for the teachers- even despite the various ‘successes’ these performances highlighted- the display of one’s pedagogy, one’s ‘craft’ seemed to amplify the melancholia, the presence of the lost ideal. In handing the art over to the ‘crowd’, there is a certain loss of control as one opens oneself up to the scrutiny and judgment of others. But more importantly perhaps, the intimacy of the process, enjoyed *and* endured over the previous several weeks, loses its grip. This sudden overexposure to too much light accentuates the disappointment, the self-recrimination, always lurking beneath the surface. At least in the classroom, you can dress it up or toss it into the general *mélange* of disappointment and let-down. But out there, centre stage, for all to see, it is a pedagogical transposition into a new key and there is no controlling what judgment will be brought to bear on it. This giving-over is of course not unfamiliar to artists, but for teachers, even drama teachers, this public viewing may place a burden on pedagogy that is less common. We’re all in this auditorium under the guise of ‘performance’ but the social too is on display, the underground pedagogy has been brought to the surface. What have the students **LEARNED**, the audience wonders silently?

In one sense, the audience made public the teacher’s encounter with melancholia. In the process of giving over the learning to a wider public, a teacher may lose the ability to rationalize and contain the melancholia. One’s own parameters for success and failure no longer hold; the performance has made it open to the reading of others. Ms. S.’s “It could have been so much better” is, of course, about both the social and the aesthetic, something that is now abundantly clear to us. Some of Ms. S.’s colleagues might have been impressed with the performance, others might have noticed who was on stage, *which* boy was exhibiting self-discipline, *which* girl was demonstrating commitment in a rare public moment. The aesthetic and the social cannot be

easily separated out in the moment of public performance and the criteria for judgment and the potential for disappointment, therefore, are infinite.

Though our ideas—and indeed the questions we are asking of our data—continue to evolve, the issues we have raised in this paper have given us some initial questions to bring to our international sites: Does the theatre product contain a burden of having to demonstrate its process? Does it justify its dull performance veneer with demonstrations of its social value? Can ethnography be changed enough by the study of performance to create research stories that resist forms of othering and break new ground or re-imagine ground well-trodden?

We have raised several questions in this paper that pertain to pedagogy and pedagogical practices in drama classrooms in ‘struggling’ urban schools. We have also entertained the factor of ‘the audience’ in the drama work created by teachers and students in these spaces and shared with a larger public. In this looking, we have returned to a theme that powerfully emerges in both of our Canadian research sites, that is, the theme of disappointment, which we have understood theoretically as a kind of melancholia. The students here often ‘fall short’, the teachers question their commitment, both sympathize with, and rail against, the pressures of their students’ lives, and wonder about their ability to engage ‘these students’. The theatre we witness pleases and frustrates, and as with all theatre, its aesthetic value is ephemeral. The processes of devising and/or rehearsing are a struggle, tinged with moments of real delight, playfulness, and sheer pleasure. The audiences are thrilled to see their peers on stage and it sometimes makes it all seem so much better than it was... or maybe even makes it so much better than it might have been. Throughout, as researchers, we participate with a watchful eye, aware of the pressures of the contexts and the contradictory role drama is summoned to perform: It should engage the troubled worlds of the students AND provide them with a reprieve from it all. The teachers, standing in

this awkward threshold, make choices moment by moment, aiming to validate lives they scarcely understand and offer that precious space in the school which makes it okay, maybe even desirable, to create. These first few months in our sites teach us much as researchers interested in theatre and pedagogy, the social and artistic performances of youth, and the potential of ethnography to both step in and step away, to pry open the contradictions of life and learning in urban schools.

Notes

ⁱ Gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their generous support of this study.

ⁱⁱ Students selected their own pseudonym. We asked the students to identify themselves according to familiar categories of social identity (race, class, sex, nationality etc.) but we also invited them to add ‘descriptors’ to this list that they see as relevant to their identity. Further, we asked them, specifically, how they would like researchers to refer to them in written publications. This explains the final sentence in students’ parenthetical comments.

ⁱⁱⁱ We are all too aware of how the social identifiers used in this paper may ‘fix’ participants in unintentional ways. Such descriptions are not meant to prescribe identities nor to foreclose the possibility of more fluid or changing identities in the learning context.

^{iv} The case of Voaden is particularly pertinent; he was a teacher at Central Commerce High School in Toronto in the 1920s, and judging from the historical record, his avant-garde work was more warmly received in his high school community than it would later be at the Dominion Drama Festival.

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