

Performing arts and STEAM
Anne Harris Taiwan October 2018

When I was a teenager, a poor girl from the country,
I needed someone to show me other ways of being.
A faraway time
in which a young girl from a poor place
can fly beyond her circumstances,
can become something she can't yet see,
can break free from the bonds of gravity
and the unities that bind us up in adulthood.

I wanted to write poems like Nikki Giovanni:

*Ever been kidnapped
by a poet?
if i were a poet
i'd kidnap you
put you in my phrases and meter
You to jones beach
or maybe coney island
or maybe just to my house ...
lyric you in lilacs
dash you in the rain*

But a few months later, my play IN THE GARDEN was a winner of the American national Young Playwrights Festival and received a professional production off-Broadway, at The Public Theatre. The 5 teenage winners of that year went to Broadway shows with Sam Shepard and Jessica Lange, had dinner with Mary Rogers, hung out with Stephen Sondheim and our lives were changed. Utterly changed. Once.

(breathe)
Once upon a time there was a story
A story about place
Once upon a *place*
One story upon one place at one time which can become other times
which can become all times
Becomes, in other words, us.
This story I tell in many places and many times and that is the power of story. Of
THIS story.
When a man stands upon a stage
When a man stands upon his two good legs upon a stage and
thinks aloud with others

Can it be called a story or a performance?
What makes a performance?
What makes a place?
What makes this a story and not a place? Once.

According to popular belief, Aristotle in his *Poetics* suggests three unities: that of time, place and action.

(beat)

It may be true however that like most popular beliefs, it's an exaggeration and has become a rule system for those who would like to control the making of things. A rule system for form.

Popular belief also tells us that the rules of storytelling from one era cannot dictate the rules of another.

So the virtual may be one rule-breaker of THIS time,
a contemporary rule-breaker of our unities.

A modern rule-breaker, a 'reluctant learner', shall we say, of classical drama, like Shakespeare, ahead of or out of his time.

The virtual, to McLuhan, was a time, a place AND an action.

Like the alphabet, a way to tell stories.

Both drama and technology are moving us toward the clouds – magical, ritualised and algorithmic.

The classical unities of time, place and action are here, in the 'implicit body as performance' (Stern 2013)

the body in its ever-present and insistent flesh,
even in virtual places and times and actions.

Because for the virtual to make sense –
we must remember what we knew of the virtual as children.
we return to drama and storytelling in this,
this moment.

But technology might also let us think differently about a so-called here and now,
in fact it might allow us to live a here and now differently,
story them differently,
drama them differently,
in virtually. Brand. new. ways.

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I found myself in the 1990s in the remote Australian desert town of Alice Springs, teaching drama.

When I got the job, I spent every day until I started working on a 30-page "Timeline of Western Drama", which I photocopied, stapled and had ready for my first day of my first Year 9 Drama class.

I will never forget those 30 faces looking up at me from their circle on the carpeted floor: “Alright kids, lets’ start with the Greeks. Turn to page 1 please!”

Nothing.

Finally, one small wiry white boy raised up his hand with a sardonic grin on his face.

Yes, Nathan?

Miss, can’t we just play Duck Duck Goose?

I did have the decency to throw out the Timeline that day, but I wouldn’t let them play ‘kids games’ like that. They were going to learn something if it killed me.

Teaching was not like playwriting and not like the Young Playwrights Festival.

It was hard.

It was adversarial.

It was like the Hunger Games in there.

It involved manipulations of time, space and action.

I thought about Aristotle but kept him to myself.

Somehow, I kept teaching. I cried in the back of the auditorium on the last day of school my first year. I couldn’t believe I was still alive.

“Well, you made it,” was all my principal said as he passed me on his way to the car park.

But I was hooked. I set about learning to teach – which I realised was a different artform than writing.

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In my 2014 book *The Creative Turn*, I interviewed others who had been in the Young Playwrights’ Festival, about how they thought that professional theatre experience as teenagers had impacted our lives over the past 30 years. Our life trajectories have been extremely diverse, but our answers were the same: it altered our lives completely.

One of them was my friend Madeleine George, who was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in Drama that year. She told me this about the time, place and action of participating in the Young Playwrights’ Festival:

...They gave us tickets to see ‘Angels in America.’ It had just opened -- me and two other teenagers, no adults with us – we sat in the third row. And then the angel exploded through the ceiling at the end, and we were showered – like dust got all over us. And we got in a cab to go home

And we cried.

You know, we were speechless.

Speechless.

I mean of course we all went and saw the high school production of ‘Bye Bye Birdie’ and loved it when we were kids, but that is not the same.

This was like the pinnacle of achievement and it’s—you could be right next to it. We understood that there’s no reason why you can’t

walk right up and
stand right next to it.
That experience was determinant --
I was definitely never going to
not try to be in the theatre, after that.
and...when they put [us] in a room with other people who were similarly bizarre, it's
like a kind of kinship" (Harris, pp 34-36).

Theatre as kinship.

Our encounter with the magical through theatre changed the course of our lives:

Temporally.

Geographically.

Dramatically.

Time. Place. Action.

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In Marshall McLuhan's 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he argues that the west is coming to the end of the 'Gutenberg era' of text, books and print.

That the invention of the printing press is going through a total reformation as a result of what he calls the 'electronic galaxy' of digital media.

McLuhan told us a story

about how time and place could co-exist together,

Could be the same thing and multiple things at the same time,

within a continuum of technological advancement that has characterised human existence since our beginnings.

He did NOT suggest that digital technology would make stories, or books, or human performance obsolete.

In fact, he recognised that the relentless progression of technology shows us

over and over again

poignantly

just how central drama, ritual and performance are to human life.

He saw how virtual technology is nothing more than a means to re/open to one another and to the universe.

A means to connect and re/connect to 'clouds' of many kinds, to magical kingdoms,

to faraway places and times and actions.

McLuhan tried to leave us a story about technology

A relationship to the virtual-as-storytelling

A vision of the virtual

as a stage upon which to build new kinds of "unities" between time,

place

and action.

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Twice upon a time
there were many stories in many places
and the most amazing thing was this:
That in those times and all of those places,
the stories were often the same
the stories were very much the same
even when the man
And the woman and the others and all the animals
Were different. And so we can tell stories
And people
And lives lived in places at times
And this is why I know the power of the story
And can feel the power of this place. This time. This action.

Virtually the only unity we know for sure that Aristotle recommended,
Was unity of action.
He said drama should be “an imitation of an action that is complete, whole, and of a
certain magnitude.”
As far as time and place are concerned, they’ve always been a fly in the ointment of
dramatists not to mention teachers.

Aristotle being the sensible teacher he was did not, in fact, prescribe any rule for the
unity of place at all,
No standardized test, let’s say, for what unity actually meant
for bodies-in-space.
And these days it’s even harder to imagine what bodies
bodies-in-virtual-time-and-place-and-sometimes-action might be capable OF.
How can the virtual challenge the unities? Can it help us see the
Dis-unity
of life even more clearly,
Even while it offers new times, places and actions in which we might. Teach and
learn.

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I started the Central Australian Young Playwrights Festival with some actor friends in
Alice Springs. The young people came, mostly because we took them on ‘playwriting
camps’ out of town with lots of candy and BBQ and games and time away from
home.

But theatre was meaningless to them.
They said that it was old white peoples’ business, which hurt me deeply as I
didn’t want to believe I was either old OR white.
But eventually the truth sank in,
and so I started to look for ways to make it relevant to them,
the way Stephen Sondheim had made it relevant to us
all those years ago. Time.

These young people were Indigenous, white, South Sudanese, but they all found something to say about the action, the times, the places of their lives. I learned from them that not everyone has the same relationship to words that I do, the same love of language, the same comfortable literacy that makes words and books my friends, especially when the world seems too much to bear.

They were not the teenage playwriting freaks that Madeleine and I had known, that we had been. These were the kids for whom words were enemies, Words were bullies waiting around the corner in every classroom, every assignment To trip them up Laugh at them Make them feel stupid. Words are not a refuge or a cloud to students like that, They're a terrifying brightly-lit stage of nightmares, Where you find yourself exposed and forget all your lines.

It made me a better teacher to realise this, and slowly I started to bring the playing back into the writing and my English and Drama classes started to be about storying worlds, instead of timelines. Once.

Once upon a time there was a story
A story about place
Once upon a place
One story upon one place at one time which can become other times which can become all times.
This story I tell in many places and many times and that is the power of story.
Of this story.
When a woman stands upon a stage
When a woman stands upon her two good legs upon a stage and thinks aloud with others
Can it be called a story or a performance?
What makes a performance?
What makes a place?
What makes this a story and not a place?

Once upon a place there were many stories in many places and the most amazing thing was this:
That in those times and in all of those places,
the stories were often the same the stories were very much the same even when the man
And the woman and the others and all the animals
Were different.

And so we can talk about stories
And people
And lives lived in places at times
And this is why I know the power of story
And can feel the power of this place. This time. This action.

So today we can talk about drama and talk about teaching and we can gather
in a place (namely: this place) called Taipei.
to talk about drama and stories and performances and teaching which requires time,
and thanks to the organizers of this gathering, we have some time.
Not a lot of time, never ENOUGH time, but some time.
And so we gather.
And we have talked about place, and time and action.
And we are performing, and we have shared stories about performing, and teaching,
and we've shared stories about standing upon our legs or in chairs upon stages
Because we share a view that these things are important.
Standing together is important.
It's a kind of kinship, Madeleine said.

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The Virtual is showing us the inherent disunity of life, even while offering us new
ways to unite. This is a problem or possibility to be grappled with by the
contemporary actor and teacher both. But is it a problem of time? Space? Or action.

What does it even mean to say once upon a time?
Because can you really - after all - stand *upon* a time?
It returns us again to clouds,
of flying through the clouds and standing upon a place and how, in clouds, time and
sense become a place.
A dream-place of clouds that populate the stories of children
and haven't we all wanted to recline on a cloud and draw a picture or listen to a
story or lick a lollipop like we have seen in our childhood books?
Like we have believed. Once.

But we cannot do it.
Not yet,
because we can't recline upon a cloud.
So a cloud is -- in a way -- a place and a not-place, and in the nomenclature of
Aristotle's ancient storytelling, which -- after all -- the performing arts are --
in the nomenclature of ancient virtual storytelling, we can say,
once upon a time
and understand that we are really talking about once upon a *place*
at a particular and magical time.
Or maybe multiple times.
Maybe twice upon a virtual place.

And we understand this subtext, we know that magic is implicit, because such stories are never composed and retold - *performed*, we might say - these stories are never performed about mundane and unmagical times and places.

They are not told

by and large

about grocery shopping, or school runs, or doctor's visits or lawn-mowing, although probably and maybe they should be.

And maybe that is something that one of us here or one of our students will do and should do and that would be an honourable thing, because as we all know these are also magical things that are often overlooked and yet constitute the better part of our lives.

And our lives are, most of us would agree, magical at one time or another.

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So if we take it then as reasonable

that we can begin a magical performance or class even. by saying once upon a place.

And we understand that to mean:

a place and time, in which magical things occur,

Then can I ask you - can I *invite* you - to consider the possibility that

Time and Place are interchangeable through the doing of action.

That place and time and bodies are co-constituted

In magical ways

In *magical* ways

that open a crack into what it means to be human.

And that the magical crack –

May be today digital or embodied,

or both.

And it may help us face both the future and the present 'betterly'.

For as TS Eliot says:

'Time present and

time past

are both perhaps present in time future

and time future contained in time past.'

That is, the magical crack is based in our ritualised knowing, our bodies-in-time-and-place-knowing

And need nothing more,

in order to know the truth of them.

Nothing more,

like school

or a national curriculum,

or dusting the house on Saturday

or designer shoes
or the correct school uniform.

That our bodies, our minds, our places and time do converge in everyday ways that we understand as magical especially in the telling, the retelling, over time, between us –
and that is not a small thing, that is not *incidental* –
It is why we come back to stories, and family, and classrooms and the soul and performance and ritual and enactment
And, finally, to love.

Because while we all must live in a particular place at a particular *time*, we simultaneously know all too well
We feel – which is sometimes more reliable than knowing –
We remember in our bodies – that there is something else going on here, that we are part of a continuum
part of something longer, bigger and more dynamic
that may be in some or every sense:
virtual.

And it is this time-place-action-virtual continuum that we dramatists and actors and teachers trade in.

A magical continuum that is linked to all-time and all-place and in this everyplace, and everytime,

Then we can in fact recline on a cloud and tell each other stories, learning and performing in and through and with one another.

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Jonathan Neelands reminds me as a teacher, a dramatist and a collaborator, reminds us that

“there is no ‘real’
to mourn or to protect” –
and that by approaching the integration of drama and drama teaching, with technology,
the world opens up to us,
rather than contracts or siloes off or narrows down.

No bells ring, no classes end.

The work expands as students age and experiment, like young playwrights scatter across places and times.

Neelands says “each new generation demands new ways of seeing itself on stage” (from Raymond Williams, in Neelands 2011). And stages, of course, can be anywhere, and classrooms are all around us.

But what else might be possible if we embrace these multiple universes at once?
TS Eliot, again says

Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

... *human kind*

Cannot bear very much reality.

Time past and time future

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

SO.

How might it be to tell a story that begins *twice upon a time*....?

How might we be here and not-here,

on the cloud and in the classroom at the same time?

And what of the body in the classroom?

The classroom as stage,

the stage as a crack into the mysterious,

the classroom as cloud?

And this IS the power of performance in education. It is not how we can *apply* drama in STEM or other subjects, it's how performance makes students *think differently* about everything, everything. About physics, about ethics, about sustainability, about mathematics, but perhaps most importantly? About themselves and each other.

After that first challenging year, I remained a high school English, Drama and Media teacher for 11 years before I started working in universities. In high schools that are time-poor, combining humanities subjects like English, Drama, History and Media Studies are logical cross-curricular combinations. By using the compatible methods and pedagogies of language, performance, and embodied learning, secondary teachers can easily improve reading, public speaking and literacies work with digital collaboration, augmented reality, virtual reality tools if the schools have them, and whole-school performing art and cultural events. All students need to learn public speaking and presentation skills for their future lives. These are not new ideas. The well-established "Project Based Learning" or PBL has for more than 20 years brought together different disciplinary learning around a shared project, collaboration across the subjects, which enables student-led learning.

One example of such a cross-curricular unit that showed this kind of artistic innovation was a year 10 unit I did on Homer's Greek myth of the Odyssey at that school in Alice Springs, in the Australian desert.

I co-designed with my class a way to bring this ancient story to life that drew on the cultural context of Alice Springs – the students' solution was to adapt it to remote town culture which combined Aboriginal and white western ways of being. They decided to tell their version of the stories using performance poetry and hip hop 'freestyling' (improvising), and rename it ULYSSES: A Central Australian *hip hopera*. While I was their English and Drama teacher, we decided to reach out to some of the other teachers, mainly Science, Mathematics and History. In my English class they worked on the script in small teams assigned to difference 'scenes' in the journey of

Odysseus as he sailed back to Ithaca. In Drama they worked on their performance. In History they researched what was happening in ancient Greece and what kinds of conflicts caused people like Odysseus to sail away for so many years at war, or why Homer would make two epic poems about it. In Science the students investigated the geography of the Aegean sea and the region of northwestern Greece where ancient Ithaca had been, and in mathematics they studied the physics of the ships that could sail for such long distances, and how these ancient seamen calculated their navigations without today's sophisticated navigational devices and tools.

They worked on this cross-curricular project all semester, so for about 6 months. In the end, each student had a portfolio that was cross-curricular, and could be assessed both collectively and individually. There was a public performance, there were more traditional outputs, all of which could be assessed and which cross-informed one another.

This kind of project encourages cross-curricular collaboration which does not put all the burden of that extra work on the drama or arts teachers. In this project, all participating teachers worked together to develop the project from their own expertise areas, the STEM teachers in cooperation with the teachers of the so-called "arts" subjects. In this way we were all able to see how the STEM subjects are inherently creative, and the arts subjects are inherently rigorous or 'core' to deep learning. Experiential and embodied learning has always known this, including health and physical education, not just arts subjects. When students can actively engage physically, emotionally, and collaboratively, when they can improvise, when they can bring their own original ideas to the learning of new content, they are more engaged, and they retain more for longer. Yet most secondary schools continue to teach and learn in siloed ways, each subject in isolation from the other. Evidence shows that working and learning in siloed ways does not foster creativity, and does not build 21st Century Skills for the workplace. It is now time to work toward STEAM, or more transdisciplinary ways, to reinforce the interconnected nature of all these subjects and content areas.

In Australia we're struggling to expand the STEM focus in education to the less narrow and more transdisciplinary STEAM approach. Although 75% of Australian universities support creativity as a graduate attribute, there is still no explicit strategy or approach to integrating drama or other arts into STEM subjects, in fact they are being reduced. Not since McWilliam 2008 has there been nationally-funded creativity in education research except my two Australian Research Council studies on creativity across secondary schools and higher education, but we need more.

Last year, the Australian Parliamentary 'Inquiry into Innovation and Creativity (2017)' considered the significance of the arts in STEAM, and recommended that the "National Innovation and Science Agenda explicitly recognise the importance of STEAM and the arts more generally" in secondary schooling (p. 40). STEAM approaches push educators to make the conditions and connections for more creative engagement,

encouraging learners to think together but also *do* together.

The so-called STEM-to-STEAM agenda has its roots in the history of philosophy, aesthetics, and educational theory, in which science and arts were once understood as dialogic, and not polarised as today. The international shift toward STEAM is already happening. As identified by the BERA Research Commission (2017), the Warwick Commission (2015), the Welsh (2015), Korean (2015) and Australian (2017) national vision reports, a move toward STEAM education is urgently required, and those of us here today are perfectly positioned to lead the way!

So how can performing arts and drama contribute to this STEAM approach to a more aesthetic education? By remembering that we are all inherently performative. We perform when we talk with one another. Students are already 'performing' when they participate in class. Drama is not only a set of skills to be learned by those who want to be on the stage. It is a way of re-integrating students' awareness of how to collaborate, how to present themselves to the world, how to develop critical thinking, and to make themselves understood, wherever they go in the world, whatever the future holds.

It's a way of creating – what Madeleine George called -- a kind of kinship.

Between not only the kids who love theatre, but between us all.

Creating a unity that will help our students thrive,

See themselves differently

Even when they are doing maths, science, physical education.

A unity of time. Place. Action.

But most of all, unity between each and every student,

A kinship to carry them through the rest of their lives.

A sense of belonging.

Through which a young person from any place

can fly beyond their circumstances,

can become something they can't yet see.

THANK YOU

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