

NARRATIVE POEM INTO PERFORMANCE (3)
PREPARING, POLISHING AND PERFORMING THE TEXT



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In her final article on taking a KS2 class to the point where they can give a performance, Alison Chaplin looks at the lead-up to the performance itself, how children can assess how it went, and some possible follow-up literacy tasks.

When the time comes to start structuring a performance, children can be asked to sit in a circle and given copies of the script for a read through, with individual children selected to read the lines of dialogue and the stage directions. In the case of a class working on my script of Hilaire Belloc's 'Matilda' (see [Narrative Poem into Performance \(2\)](#)), the teacher should next invite suggestions as to what might be said during the different improvised conversations, being careful to acknowledge all responses. If time allows, the script can be read through again, with some children acting out the improvised conversations. At the end of the session, the teacher explains that this mix of lines and improvisation will form the basis of the performance, and that the actors who are cast in the roles will be devising the improvisations.

Which brings us to ...

Casting

For a performance that is quite structured, as 'Matilda' should be, it is preferable - if not essential - that roles are clearly defined and fairly distributed. Casting a play is always difficult: there are usually several volunteers for the main role; and at least one part in every production is sought after by half the cast! This is often, bizarrely, a role which the teacher considers to be small, even insignificant. As all actors lay themselves open to rejection, the casting process should be approached with care and consideration.

To cast a performance of 'Matilda', I observe the children during improvisation work, noting not only their skills in acting but also their ability to take instruction and how they work with others. It is also important, in this case, that the narrators have strong reading skills and loud, clear, voices. This may seem obvious, but I have seen many play performances weakened by poor narration. My own preferred method for casting a play is as follows:

- I distribute pens and small slips of paper and ask children to write down, confidentially, their first and second role choices. I advise them to try and make sure the spelling is correct, and to add their names and surnames on the slips. Some children will only have one choice of role; others will all go for the same first choice; and there will be a few children who 'don't care' what part they are given. I insist that, whatever they decide, it is their own choice and not influenced by their friends - or enemies!

- I gather all the pieces of paper together and, at another time, sit down and work out who wants what and which role combinations would work. I try to be as fair as possible - both to the children and the play. When I have worked out a cast, I use the next session to read out the cast list - character first, then who is cast in that role.
- I allow some time afterwards for children to discuss what part they've been given and, if necessary, to approach me for reassurance. With 'Matilda', children who have been cast as Townspeople or people walking in the street may feel disappointed, but they can be encouraged to devise strong, identifiable characters who relate to each other and have a defined place in the performance. They can also be reassured by being asked to create short, improvised conversations which can be enacted with the other children cast in these roles. These improvisations can then be included at appropriate points in the performance.

Once the performance has been cast and there has been a read through of the script in role, it is time for rehearsals.

Rehearsals

Rehearsals, and how they are structured, depend quite a lot on how much time - particularly hall time - is available. Also, a long rehearsal process can induce boredom in performers, so short and focussed is always more productive. My last performance of 'Matilda' took just six hour-long sessions to create; and the result was simple but effective.

Starting from the beginning of the poem (sounds obvious, but needs reinforcing), I use a forum theatre method of devising and developing the improvised sections of the production, inviting suggestions from both the audience and the actors as to what the characters should say and do. I try these out and amend, improve or develop as necessary. With my performers, I work slowly through the script in this manner, concentrating on a small section at each rehearsal and repeating it until everyone is happy. However, throughout the process the decision about what is acceptable and effective is mine.

With any play, at each rehearsal, I try to move on to the next section and avoid repeating earlier sections first, as this tends to produce a 'top heavy' performance where the beginning of the play is very slick but later sections are under-rehearsed. With 'Matilda', I continue to combine teacher-led direction with forum theatre until I have created a complete performance. Then, I rehearse the full play several times, in order to ensure that all the actors know what is happening, what their roles are and when they enter!

Teachers who don't feel confident enough to use the forum theatre technique could ask children to work on their individual sections independently, and then draw them all together. This would involve Matilda and her aunt working alone to devise their short improvisations, the narrators learning and practising their speeches together, the Firemen devising a short improvised scene about arriving at Matilda's house to find no evidence of a fire, and the Townspeople creating short, improvised conversations about Matilda and her behaviour. This should take only one or two sessions for development, a third to put all of the improvisations in place, and a fourth to add any others - for example the mimes - and give the performance a clear structure.

Once rehearsals are running smoothly, the focus can shift: to elements such as costumes, props, staging and voice projection. Out of all of the many performances I have directed, few have been staged with full costumes, lighting and scenery. These are not necessary for an effective production. Also, too much focus on practicalities can detract from what is important: the children and their performance. However, the following are suggestions for tackling the practical aspects of staging 'Matilda', and they could be applied to many kinds of production.

Costumes, props and make-up

These can be minimal but effective:

- Narrators in smart black and white clothes - a combination of trousers or skirts and shirts, blouses or T-shirts with smart black or white shoes (no trainers)
- Matilda in a long dress with tights and ballet slippers, her hair tied with a matching ribbon
- Aunt in a long skirt and blouse with smart, flat shoes and hair tied in a bun
- Firefighters in all-black outfits combined with black boots or Wellingtons. Firemen's helmets can be hired from a costume shop for extra effect
- Townspeople in costumes appropriate to their characters: some in school uniforms, others dressed as adults in suits (with a briefcase)
- Matilda and Aunt in minimal make-up (eye shadow, lipstick and blusher); the same for some of the Townspeople; all other characters make-up free
- The only props needed are those carried on (and off) by the Townspeople - briefcases, shopping bags, umbrellas, etc.

Staging

For a proscenium arch-style stage, I have used a black backdrop and pinned onto this a street scene drawn by children - complete with burning house - on a length of wall lining paper. No furniture, lighting or sound effects were used. The actors sat on the floor, facing inwards towards the stage, throughout the performance, whilst the narrators sat on chairs at the side of the staging area, facing towards the audience. The Fire Brigade entered in three different groups - two children per group - from a storage area behind the audience; but they could equally well enter from three different places if practicable and preferred.

Voice projection

This is the hardest performance element to teach, yet it seems the most obvious. It never fails to amaze me that children can make an inordinate amount of noise during workshops and rehearsals, yet go mute when placed on a stage! The most difficult aspect is to encourage them to speak loudly, rather than shout, and to retain variation in their vocal tone at the same time as making themselves heard. I've never yet managed to achieve a cast where every single actor could be heard by every member of the audience - and don't expect I ever will - but the following exercises can help in encouraging children to explore vocal volume and help them to understand how to project their voices.

Breathing exercises

The children are asked to find a space and lie on the floor. They take a deep breath, and then let the air out of their mouths slowly. This is repeated, but the next time they let the air out they are asked to make a soft sound, such as 'ooh', 'aah' or 'huuh'. The children repeat the exercise several times, each time changing the shape of their mouth to vary the type of sound they make. Then, one sound is chosen and the children have to produce it to different volumes by controlling the exhalation of their breath: first they make the sound quietly, almost whispering; then loudly; then normally; then quietly again. Finally, they stand in a circle and repeat the exercise as the teacher 'conducts' the volume level of the exhaled sound. If worked through slowly and thoroughly, these exercises are invaluable for enabling children to understand how their voices work and how volume is controlled through breathing.

Projecting and listening

The children are asked to find a partner and sit back-to-back with them. They must then have a conversation on any topic - their last holiday, their favourite book, and so on - but without turning round. This encourages them to project effectively, so that their partner can hear, and to listen carefully.



Talking at a distance

Next, the children must stand up and face their partner, still continuing their conversations. At regular intervals, they are told to take a step apart but to continue talking to each other. The instruction to move back is repeated several times, until partners are standing several feet away from each other. At this stage, the noise will be deafening, but pairs should still be conversing effectively with each other.

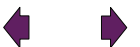
Facing the audience

'Talking at a distance' helps with another common presentational problem. Many young actors find reassurance in placing themselves at the back of the stage, out of reach of their audience. Others stand too close to their fellow actors for comfort, or make the mistake of believing that theatre dialogue should be delivered in the same way as normal, everyday conversation. This results in actors being so far away from the audience that they cannot be heard, or situating themselves on the stage in the same position as they would in the classroom. The wonder of theatre is that what feels strange to us as actors never looks strange from an audience's perspective. It is imperative that children understand the need both to face their audience and to allow space between performers. It is a difficult concept to grasp, but the above vocal exercise should enable children to understand that theatre conversations are different from normal conversations, and that you don't need to be standing right next to the person you're talking to on stage. It is also important to understand that a performance, however impressive, is wasted if it is not seen or heard by the audience!

Much of the work on positioning on stage will have been achieved during presentation of the children's improvisations, especially those which specifically assessed their presentation skills, so all that should be needed is reinforcement. As a general guide though, for performances on a proscenium arch stage, children should be encouraged to keep their feet pointing towards the audience at all times. It doesn't matter if their heads or bodies are facing towards other performers; if their feet are towards the audience, that's the direction in which their voices and facial expressions will be directed.

Don't forget the curtain call!

The old saying, 'It's not how you start, it's how you finish', is never more true than when applied to the final bow. A strong performance can be completely spoilt by an untidy, unrehearsed, unprofessional curtain call; so some time should be allowed during the final rehearsal to organise and practise this. I'm not in favour of 'walk downs', where characters come on individually to different audience responses - in fact I'm very much against them - but a production does need to have a polished closure, and I've found that the following method is the most effective.



- The children to line up in rows, according to height, with the tallest at the back. They should be spaced out so that they can all see and be seen by the audience.
- The children must note who they are standing next to, in front of and behind, and remember this.
- The children stand upright, with their feet together and their hands resting lightly on the front of their thighs.
- One child in the centre of the front row to starts the bow, and all the other children watch this child carefully, without making this too obvious!
- When the nominated child on the front row bows, slowly, everyone must bow. Bowing is from the waist, with hands sliding down to the knees and eyes directed at the floor.
- Everyone must move at the same, slow pace. Bowing too quickly can give the appearance of nodding ducks!
- The children should hold the bowing position for a slow, silent, count of 'two', then straighten up again.
- Repeat, with everyone following the front row leader again.

It is also essential to ensure that this level of professionalism applies when children are leaving the stage, or performance area. They must not lose concentration, shout, scream, wave at their grandmas or do anything else which will detract from their lovely performance and polished curtain call!

Evaluation, and linked literacy work

It's useful, after the excitement of the performance has waned a little, to evaluate how the children felt about it. This can take the form of a question and answer session, inviting comments on what they felt were the positive elements, what they would improve if they had the opportunity, which performances they felt were strong and why, and so on. It is important, though, to ensure that this does not become too personal or critical.

Another option is to ask the children to write a review of the performance and their role in it. The questions above can be used as prompts, or children can be asked to focus on one element of the production - the workshops, the rehearsals, their character, or the performance. These reviews can be read out in class, copied up neatly and displayed around the school.



Written evaluations provide a useful link to follow-on literacy tasks. The following tasks can be used with 'Matilda':

- Pupils design a programme for their production, using either real cast names, famous actors, or teachers in the cast list!
- Working in small groups, pupils write the poem as a playscript, one scene per group.
- Pupils write their own poem about telling lies. Older ones should use the same rhyming pattern as 'Matilda'.
- Pupils write the story of how Matilda came to live with her aunt, i.e. what happened to her before the poem started.
- Pupils write a short description of one of the characters. (Younger children can also draw an accompanying picture.)
- The class can compare the story of 'Matilda' with that of 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf'. What are the similarities and differences? Do they know stories with a similar moral?

Conclusion

I hope that I have shown how a simple story such as that of 'Matilda' can evolve into a junior performance which meets the needs of each individual child and, simultaneously, achieves many of the drama objectives. A 'devised' performance still needs structure; a structured performance can be devised: the objectives are open to interpretation, and how they are applied is down to each teacher. Productions don't need expensive costumes, elaborate sets or flashy lighting to be effective. What they do need are confident children who are eager to communicate with their audience, focussed on developing their performance skills, able to recognise the value of working with others and - ultimately - proud of what they have achieved.

Alison Chaplin manages *Arts On The Move* - a company providing specialist drama and theatre services for schools. She can be contacted at www.artsonthemove.co.uk

Reference

QCA, *Teaching speaking and listening in Key stages 1 and 2*, 1999

