

NARRATIVE POEM INTO PERFORMANCE (2)  
INTRODUCING THE TEXT: MATILDA BY HILAIRE BELLOC

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**ARTS**  
*on the move*



## Narrative Poem into Performance (2) - Introducing the Text

In the second of three articles on how to develop a KS2 class's drama skills to the point where they can give a performance, Alison Chaplin moves on from the initial workshop sessions she described in Part 1 to introducing children to the material that will form the basis of their performance.

In my first article, I explained how the drama objectives relating to performance, as laid out in the QCA document *Teaching speaking and listening in Key Stages 1 and 2*, could be achieved through devised, as well as through scripted, productions. I showed that using a workshop method of teaching drama, and moving through simple introductory sessions, could do the following:

- build pupils' self-confidence
- develop their speaking and listening skills
- improve their negotiation skills
- make them aware of appropriate responses
- allow opportunities for improvisation and role play
- encourage pupils to present their work to others.

I also provided suggestions as to how, within these sessions, teachers could assess and evaluate drama performances. The article ended with an account of some activities which explored the themes and issues of performance material; but I did not introduce the performance material itself. That is the point at which this article begins.

### From workshop sessions to production

My aim now is to show how to develop the initial workshop sessions into a drama performance or production which combines improvised scenes with minimal scripted text or line learning. Although it is assumed that devised performances are easier to organise than scripted plays, on the whole, this is not the case. Many children prefer to work on a project which is formally structured with clearly established roles, defined settings and lines they have to learn! The amount of formal structure you want your production to have will depend on the age and ability of the children, the amount of time available for rehearsals, how much hall time you can have, your budget, and what staff and parental support is available. As end-of-term productions, I have directed both full-scale, elaborately presented, scripted plays and simply-structured, devised performances with nominal costumes and minimal scenery. Both were enjoyed by performers and audience alike; both inspired the same level of commitment from the actors involved; and both achieved the QCA drama objectives!



The project outlined in this, the previous, and the next (and final) article is one which creates a performance based on the poem 'Matilda' ('Who told lies and was burned to death') by Hilaire Belloc. Earlier sessions explored the theme of 'telling lies', and this is now given a stronger focus by introducing children to the poem itself. A copy of the poem is provided later in this article.

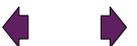
## Working on the poem in the classroom

The poem should be read through, followed by a discussion of such questions as:

- What is this poem about?
- Who are the main characters?
- Why do you think Matilda tells lies?
- How do you think her aunt feels about her lying?
- Why do you think Matilda lives with her aunt?
- What do you think the townspeople think about Matilda?
- Where was Matilda's aunt when the fire broke out?
- Why didn't the fire brigade come to rescue Matilda when the house really was burning?
- What is the moral of this story?

## Role-on-the-wall

This technique helps pupils to understand central characters, their feelings and motivations and facts about them. It calls for a large sheet of paper - I use a five-foot length of lining wallpaper - on which a thin child lies while her outline is drawn in black marker pen (taking care not to mark her clothes!). The children are then told that the outline represents the character of Matilda, and that facts they know about Matilda should be written in the space around the outside of the outline, whilst her feelings should be written inside of it. Children need to be given a few moments to consider what they *know* about Matilda and what they *think* she might feel, and then they are invited to take turns to come up and write their ideas on the sheet - preferably using blue marker pens for clarity. They should be told not to be too concerned about spelling, and not to worry if their ideas are duplicated. Many will be, and these duplications often reflect the more important aspects of a character. This process continues until a good supply of ideas has been provided, and then the outline is pinned on the wall to be used as a point of reference for a discussion about Matilda, considering the positive and negative aspects other personality, her motivation, what emotional difficulties she may have and what facts have been surmised about her character. This process can be repeated with any of the other characters - actual or imagined - from the poem.



## Hot-seating

With top juniors, volunteers can be asked to sit on the 'hot seat' and respond to questions in role as certain characters: Matilda, her Aunt, a fire fighter, a local person (roles can be repeated from the earlier 'Whole group role play', if suitable) and any others that seem appropriate. Participants need to be carefully chosen to be able to sustain their role and not become self-conscious about responding individually in front of the class. With younger pupils, the teacher can take the 'hot-seat' in various roles, telling the children who they are each time and removing themselves from the chair to return to 'teacher mode'. In each case, children are invited to put questions in order to find out as much as possible about each character's behaviour, motivations, feelings, habits and responses to the events portrayed in the poem.

## Role-on-the-wall revisited

The aim of the hot-seating session is to fill in any gaps left after the role-on-the-wall activity. So, when as many characters as time and inspiration allows have been hot-seated, attention should be drawn back to the role-on-the-wall outline. Now, children are invited, using differently coloured marker pens (red works very well at this stage), to add to, remove or amend any of the ideas that were written down before. This should produce a clear picture of the character and a good idea of just how much new information has been gathered via the hot-seating exercise.

Finally, a brief plenary session is useful for defining any obscure or difficult words.

## Bringing the poem to life

After a classroom session has been spent exploring the characters and their responses to the story, the next stage is to begin bringing the text - characters and story - to life, and to start structuring the performance. The introductory practical sessions given below reinforce the drama skills learnt during earlier workshop sessions and refocus pupils' attention on the presentation and performance elements of the project. They also enable the teacher to begin to consider casting the performance, based on how the children respond both to the material and to the instructions. These activities should, again, take place in the school hall.

## Walkabout and freeze-in-role

The children are asked to stand in a space and then told to begin walking around the room slowly, carefully and quietly, looking for empty floor space to move into. The teacher blows a whistle, claps their hands, or bangs a drum and then calls out the name of a character (real or imagined) from the poem. The children are now instructed to move around the room as that character, paying particular attention to their use of body language and facial expression. Upon a command of 'Freeze!' the children should freeze in role, standing still and silent, but clearly sustaining the character. The teacher should praise any realistic, powerful or effective efforts, then instruct the children to walk around the room as themselves again. This process can be repeated several times, with a different character selected each time, for example: Matilda, Matilda's Aunt, a fire fighter, a local person, a police officer, and so on. This is also an opportunity for the teacher to select some of the more impressive, or expressive, freezes for presentation to the rest of the class, encouraging children to assess the work by again asking: 'Why do I like this freeze?'

## Paired improvisations

The children are asked to find a partner and a space to work in, then told that they are going to devise and improvise (act out) conversations which might have taken place between some of the characters. They are invited to suggest what these conversations might be. For example, they might be:

- between Matilda and her Aunt, when Matilda has been caught lying again
- the telephone conversation between Matilda and the Fire Brigade
- between townspeople discussing Matilda's lying habits
- between Matilda's Aunt and the Fire Brigade when she has to pay for them to leave
- between members of the Fire Brigade after the bogus call
- between Matilda and her Aunt when her Aunt refuses to take Matilda to the theatre
- between townspeople after the fire.

Pairs should work through each conversation separately, with a minimum amount of preparation and performance time - no longer than two minutes - for each one. The teacher invites or selects pairings to show their improvised conversations and uses these presentations, again, to discuss realism, vocal skills, characterisation and believability and to assess other aspects of the performance.



## Small group improvisations

**For older pupils** The children are asked to form groups of seven to eight and instructed to create a performance in which they improvise the whole story with dialogue they devise themselves, but without using the poem as narration. The aim is for pupils to tell the whole story, including character interactions and responses, in their own words - without omitting anything. Roles should be negotiated and selected by the members of each group, but this needs monitoring for fairness. Groups should be allowed up to 15 minutes for discussion and rehearsal, and then performances should be viewed. The teacher assesses and evaluates, using a question-and-answer session, as previously described.

**For younger pupils** The children are asked to stand in a space and the teacher narrates the poem slowly, whilst the pupils act out or mime the actions of the different characters. The children should listen carefully to the narration and respond accordingly, working in the various roles to express characters and events. If the teacher feels confident that it will produce results, the pupils can then be encouraged to form pairs and perform spontaneous improvised dialogues based on some sections of the poem - for example, Matilda's telephone call to the Fire Brigade or Matilda's Aunt paying the Firemen to go away. Effective or realistic mimes and performances should be praised at regular intervals, and the process should be continued until the whole poem has been gone through. If time allows, the teacher can spend a few moments discussing with the children how they expressed the characters and events - and which performances were effective, realistic or expressive - and then repeat the whole process. This again enables the children to use the teacher's evaluation to improve and develop their performance.

At this point, the following should have been achieved:

- confidence has been built
- speaking and listening skills - including negotiating and producing appropriate responses - have been developed
- pupils have experienced showing their work to each other
- drama performances have been assessed by both participants and observers
- the themes and issues of the performance material have been explored
- the material itself has been used as a basis for further exploration and activities.

So, all that's left to do is to develop the performance.



## 'Matilda' - the script

To create a 30-minute performance out of this short poem, I have interspersed sections of the text with improvisations suggested and created by pupils I have worked with, and laid this out in 'scripted' form. This has enabled me to balance structured line learning with devised drama, thus meeting the varied needs of children and achieving several of the drama objectives set by QCA. It also gives pupils an easy introduction to working with a 'script' and provides a constant point of reference, which gives them a sense of security.

In my third and final article, I shall deal with casting, rehearsing and performing 'Matilda'.

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## Reference

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999 *Teaching speaking and listening in Key stages 1 and 2*



## Matilda

(Who told lies and was burned to death)

Matilda told such Dreadful Lies,  
It made one Gasp and Stretch one's Eyes;  
Her Aunt, who from her Earliest Youth,  
Had kept a Strict Regard for Truth,

Attempted to Believe Matilda:  
The effort very nearly killed her,  
And would have done so, had not She  
Discovered this Infirmity.  
For once, towards the Close of Day,  
Matilda, growing tired of play,  
And finding she was left alone,

Went tiptoe to the Telephone  
And summoned the Immediate Aid  
Of London's Noble Fire Brigade.  
Within an hour the Gallant Band  
Were pouring in on every hand,  
From Putney, Hackney Downs and Bow,  
With Courage high and Hearts a-glow,  
They galloped, roaring through the Town,

'Matilda's house is Burning Down!'  
Inspired by British Cheers and Loud  
Proceeding from the Frenzied Crowd,  
They ran their ladders through a score  
Of windows on the Ball Room Floor;  
And took Peculiar Pains to Souse  
The Pictures up and down the House.

Until Matilda's Aunt succeeded  
In showing them they were not needed;  
And even then she had to pay  
To get the men to go away!

It happened that a few Weeks later  
Her Aunt was off to the Theatre  
To see that Interesting Play

*The Second Mrs Tanqueray.*  
She had refused to take her Niece  
To hear that Entertaining Piece:  
A Deprivation Just and Wise  
To Punish her for Telling Lies.  
That Night a Fire DID break out -  
You should have heard Matilda Shout!

You should have heard her Scream and Bawl,  
And throw the window up and call  
To People passing in the Street -  
(The rapidly increasing Heat  
Encouraging her to obtain  
Their confidence) - but all in vain!  
For every time She shouted 'Fire!'  
They only answered 'Little Liar!'  
And therefore when her Aunt returned,  
Matilda, and the house, were Burned.

Hilaire Belloc

## Matilda Script

*Narrator 1 stands and introduces the poem.*

**Narrator 1:** Matilda (Who told lies and was burned to death) by Hilaire Belloc.

Matilda told such Dreadful Lies, It made one Gasp and Stretch one's Eyes;  
Her Aunt, who from her Earliest Youth, Had kept a Strict Regard for Truth,  
Attempted to Believe Matilda: the effort very nearly killed her,  
And would have done so, had not She Discovered this Infirmary.

*Narrator 1 sits down.*

*Matilda and her Aunt enter. They improvise a scene where Matilda is accused of doing something wrong but denies it and her Aunt becomes frustrated with her constant lying. Matilda's Aunt exits. Matilda sits down.*

*Narrator 2 stands.*

**Narrator 2:** For once, towards the Close of Day, Matilda, growing tired of play,

*Matilda mimes being bored and fed up.*

And finding she was left alone, went tiptoe to the Telephone

*Matilda mimes tiptoeing to the telephone.*

And summoned the Immediate Aid of London's Noble Fire Brigade.

*Matilda acts out making a telephone call to the Fire Brigade, telling them there's a fire at her house.*

Within an hour the Gallant Band were pouring in on every hand, From Putney,

*Pause for firemen to enter from Putney.*

Hackney Downs

*Pause for **firemen** to enter from Hackney Downs.*

and Bow,

*Pause for **firemen** to enter from Bow.*

With Courage high and Hearts aglow, They galloped, roaring through the Town,

***Narrator 2** sits down. **Narrator 3** stands.*

*The **Firemen** line up in front of Matilda's house, facing the audience, and shout:*

**Firemen** (*Shouting*): Matilda's House is Burning Down!

*The **townspeople** enter and cheer loudly, then mime cheering, shouting and waving at the firemen.*

**Narrator 3**: Inspired by British Cheers and Loud Proceeding from the Frenzied Crowd,  
They ran their ladders through a score of windows on the Ball Room Floor;

*The **firemen** mime putting their ladders up and climbing into Matilda's house.*

**Narrator 3**: And took Peculiar Pains to Souse the Pictures up and down the House,

*The **firemen** mime spraying water everywhere.  
They then act out looking for the fire and ask **Matilda** awkward questions!*

***Matilda** escapes whilst they aren't looking and hides herself away.  
Matilda's **Aunt** returns. Improvisation between **Aunt** and the **Firemen** about the lack of a fire.*

*The **townspeople** exit.*

Until Matilda's Aunt succeeded In showing them they were not needed;  
And even then she had to pay To get the Men to go away!

*Matilda's Aunt mimes paying the firemen. The firemen exit when they have all been paid, shaking their heads in disbelief.*

*Matilda's Aunt exits.*

*Matilda creeps out of her hiding place, laughing to herself, then exits.*

It happened that a few Weeks later Her Aunt was off to the Theatre To see that Interesting Play 'The Second Mrs Tanqueray.'

*Narrator 3 sits down. Narrator 4 stands.*

**Narrator 4:** She had refused to take her Niece To hear that Entertaining Piece: A Deprivation Just and Wise To Punish her for Telling Lies.

*Improvisation between Matilda and her Aunt with Matilda begging to be allowed to go to the theatre and her Aunt refusing because of her bad behaviour calling the Fire Brigade and telling lies.*

*Matilda's Aunt exits.*

*Matilda sits, disappointedly, on the floor. Matilda mimes smelling smoke and, on opening a door, finding a real fire burning in the house.*

*The townspeople begin to walk across the street at intervals, slowly and in character, pausing to mime chatting to each other.*

That Night a Fire DID break out — You should have heard Matilda Shout!

*Matilda acts out throwing up the window, coughing and shouting for help.*

*More townspeople enter and begin watching Matilda.*

You should have heard her Scream and Bawl,

*Matilda continues coughing and calling for help.*

And throw the window up and call  
To People passing in the Street -

*The remaining townspeople enter and are encouraged by the others to watch **Matilda**.*

(The rapidly increasing Heat  
Encouraging her to obtain Their confidence) — but all in vain!

*Narrators 1, 2 and 3 stand.*

**All narrators (Together):** For every time she shouted

**Matilda (Shouting):** Fire!

**All narrators (Together):** They only answered

**All townspeople (Shouting together):** Little Liar!

*Matilda collapses on the floor.*

*The townspeople all exit.*

**All narrators (Together):** And therefore when her Aunt returned,

*Matilda's Aunt enters.*

Matilda, and the House, were Burned.

*Matilda's Aunt freezes in a position of shock.*

