

# Languages in Drama – An International Perspective

By Annette Box

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The eighth World Congress for IDEA, the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association, was held in Paris in July this year. As President of IDEA Paris 2013, Catherine Tasca stated, 'international exchange is a healthy decentring of our gaze, without which our minds risk becoming numb and paralysed' (IDEA World Congress Handbook 2013, p.7). ANRAT identified a number of key issues at the heart of this conference to be explored, in order to pave the political, philosophical and creative path for the leaders of our future. Education policies, the relevance of a formal Arts education in schooling systems, the shared values and priorities of arts education across the globe, and the support policies in place, were seen as crucial concerns to overcome in order to determine how to forecast and proceed most innovatively and effectively. From here, the IDEA organising committee identified five key themes to guide a vast and extensive program of keynote addresses, round table discussions, workshops, papers, posters, special interest groups and performances.

The five key themes were:

- Has arts education become a global issue?
- How have Drama/Theatre and education practices become transformative learning processes?
- An embodied approach: establishing a dialogue between neuroscience and arts education
- Languages in Drama/Theatre and education: highlighting diversity or blending cultures?
- Creating and writing for and with young audiences: place and audience

It is the fourth theme, of languages in Drama and the many roles they can play, that formed the basis of our presentation, and core discovery and exploration, throughout this most valuable five-day congress.

According to the IDEA Congress Handbook, 'language, like all means of artistic expression, depicts cultures in terms of what they have in common and in terms of what distinguishes them. On stage, each language is always unique and each artist, in his or her own way, transcends, and is transcended by, these mirror-words' (IDEA World Congress Handbook 2013, p.33). It is this dichotomy, the very contrast of celebrating a unique approach while having a common metalanguage, that was of most interest to us - me, along with my colleague Michelle Crouch - in our planning of a unit for sharing on an international stage. Considering and exploring this theme caused us to create our very own list of questions:

- Is our exploration of language in Drama in Australia inclusive?
- Does it transcend boundaries and borders?
- Is visual literacy more or less universal than written or spoken forms?
- Do prejudices and political/social/cultural contexts aid or abet the creation of Drama and Theatre in Australia and across the world?

- How can Drama be used as a tool to bridge the gap across language barriers while celebrating and acknowledging the fundamental differences that exist?

These questions seemed 'large' and almost too 'grand' to conquer. Would the answers be too varied to come to any conclusion? Would there be enough current research to help guide our answers? What kind of workshop or presentation would make a valuable contribution to the exploration of this theme for international Drama educators? What drove us to attempt to answer these questions was the fact that such a conference, and our very participation in it, would contribute to an international upsurge, putting art at the heart of education. This alone made this challenging quest worthwhile (Demarcy-Mota in IDEA World Congress Handbook 2013, p.9).

Theories on theatre have long advocated the importance of the non-linguistic aspects of Drama (Buse, 2001, p.4), and centred on visual literacy and the importance of a global language for Drama and Arts Education. With this in mind, and as ambassadors of Australia, we set about finding a text which could fit the brief for our chosen theme, and which would lend itself to dramatic exploration. It was not long before the Perth-born Shaun Tan became a clear choice of author and illustrator. His numerous children's texts employ such an economy of words that the focus is the dream-like and magical images he creates, which allude to other worlds, while being underpinned with political and social messages. Discovering *The Arrival* was golden. Here was a wordless text, altogether free of written language, which seemed to be the perfect foundation from which to explore this key IDEA theme of Languages in Drama. Through this text, we would be able to highlight linguistic interbreeding and hybridisation, with the awareness that languages both connect and separate us (Aden in IDEA World Congress Handbook 2013, p.21). The role of language in Drama was further defined by the fact that artistic languages allow us to accept the undecipherable, the invisible and the inaudible (Aden in IDEA World Congress Handbook 2013, p.13). The 'silent' book, *The Arrival*, not only accepts these aspects

of life; it celebrates them. As the role of the Arts gains greater significance in the primary education setting in Australia, this text held even greater appeal for its versatility and application across the ages.

To quote Tan, *'The Arrival is a migrant story told as a series of wordless images that might seem to come from a long forgotten time. A man leaves his wife and child in an impoverished town, seeking better prospects in an unknown country on the other side of a vast ocean. He eventually finds himself in a bewildering city of foreign customs, peculiar animals, curious floating objects and indecipherable languages. With nothing more than a suitcase and a handful of currency, the immigrant must find a place to live, food to eat and some kind of gainful employment. He is helped along the way by sympathetic strangers, each carrying their own unspoken history: stories of struggle and survival in a world of incomprehensible violence, upheaval and hope.'* (www.shauntan.net). The content of this text was clearly pitched at an international audience, applicable across borders and generations. It is, ultimately, a timeless and universal piece in which the very absence of the written word in fact highlights the importance of language.

The next phase in preparing the work on this key theme was to consider the role of language not only in Drama and Theatre Education, but in the delivery of the content. While we nominated to present in English, we were briefed that, for many attendees, English would be their second, even third, language. Therefore, our own pedagogy and method of teaching instruction required some reconsideration, and this caused us to ponder just how much our content delivery is embedded in our cultural context, littered with metalanguages that may not be universal, or driven by social behaviours which are not shared across the globe. In order to guide us in this, research was required to establish what shared languages existed, internationally, within Drama. We fast discovered that terms and approaches so intrinsic to the Queensland, even Australian, approach to Arts and, more specifically, to Drama education, were not universal. Styles of Drama, playwrights, theorists and some processes and approaches to Drama education were shared; however, the vocabulary with which we are so familiar was not necessarily universal. How would we structure a presentation to our international peers, which invited them into the world of *The Arrival* and equipped them with a unit of work, which they too could integrate into their vast and varied programs, despite this ostensible valley that existed among our understandings? The irony that language itself would impede our ability to explore the role of language in Drama education was not lost on us.

The answer, of course, lay in the very absence of language; in our obligation to be economical with our words and in the presence of images and in the use of movement and song; the celebration of diversity and the communication through made-up, 'jibberish' languages (think Cirque du Soleil). We had letter-writing activities where responses were received in five different languages. The workshop featured physical group work in which the absence of the spoken word enabled greater communication through face, voice and sound. Communication activities embraced and celebrated the ability we have to transcend shared vocabularies and to create new ones.

Interestingly, despite having presented this workshop at both the Drama Queensland State Conference 'Launch 2013' and our school's PMSA Professional Development Day, it was in this international context that this unit was most successful. This alone is tribute to the capacity of a range of languages and the power of Drama to celebrate diversity and to establish a shared means of communication across cultures.

Following the development and delivery of this unit at the IDEA Congress and the return to a setting where we do have a shared vocabulary for discussing and working within the Drama context, we were encouraged to explore a more global approach to language in Drama. Utilisation of visual and physical forms of expression, the encouragement of visual literacy, and the creation of new languages and methods of communication, have previously played a role in some of our Drama units; however, these have assumed a greater role, not just as a means of educating the students within the Drama and greater Arts context, but in preparing them as global citizens, as individuals, with the skills and resilience to cope in a variety of contexts, and as young people who possess the ability to access information, despite not necessarily having the initial ability to comprehend the spoken or written word.

The IDEA Congress provided us with an opportunity to question our pedagogy, beliefs and practice, to research new and innovative approaches to Drama education across state, national and international contexts, and to explore means of transferring and sharing information to learners from a range of language backgrounds. But beyond this theme, it also allowed us to participate in celebrating the importance of Arts education for all young people, which deserves to lie at the very heart of education (Demarcy-Mota in IDEA World Congress Handbook 2013, p.4). By endowing our students with the understanding that the Arts share both common curves and distinct differences across the globe, as evidenced by the 1200 delegates from fifty countries in attendance at the Congress, we equip them with the futures-focussed drive to champion these causes beyond the school setting.

#### References:

*IDEA World Congress Handbook*, 2013

Buse, P 2001, *Drama & Theatre*, Manchester University Press, UK.

Tan, S 2013, *Picturebooks: The Arrival*, Shaun Tan, viewed 24 October 2013, <http://www.shauntan.net>.