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I write this text at the end of the hot Australian Summer of 2009. I am in Melbourne, where the horror and terror of the bush fires is still very present. The world is facing economic collapse, unfathomable climate change and global instability. The impact of disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007) seems to be playing out on every level. Yet, everywhere I look I see and feel stories of hope, of renewal, of strength and of people working together phoenix-like towards recovery – from the huge amounts of money donated by everyday Australians to the bushfire fund, to my local quilting group making hundreds of quilts to give to bushfire survivors, from the quilts that were donated from a South African group who did what they could do to help, to the stories of local football teams playing their first matches after the fires, the autumn festival going on as planned, and the primary school showing us all the power of their work in building community through creating a centre for the community in the makeshift school. These stories are all about individuals doing something to help, to repair their community, to provide comfort to someone they have never met. They are stories about actions, but their cumulative power as stories is to provide renewal and hope and further actions as we are all drawn in to participate in this narrative.

Stories are fundamental to the sharing and understanding of our experience, and the ability to create, modify and change our narratives makes other changes possible. For me, working in process drama with groups of people is the most effective way I have found for uncovering the depths of stories, creating new stories, modifying old ones, and enabling participants to see how they might be able to change their own actions by rethinking how they understand things. This article tells a story of my work with the Shaun Tan text, The Arrival, showing some ways I have used the text and what I have learned from moments of using this text as the starting point for process drama.

Leaving Home

I am working with a group of teachers. We study a beautifully drawn image of two figures gathered around a suitcase. The drawing, like all others in The Arrival, is drawn with incredible beauty and detail with pencil on paper. The faces could be European, could be Asian, there is an ‘every person’ quality about them and about the place they are from. What is certain is that this is a picture about a moment of gathering together before separation, a moment of drawing breath and holding on before letting go, being pulled apart. We look at the image together, we study it, we offer words of interpretation to it, words of description and imagine the thoughts and feelings that the man and the woman are sharing. From the preceding pages we know that they are a couple, we know that they have a child. And we know that there have been decisions made about what to take and what to leave.

We speak aloud our imagined thoughts that they might be thinking: ‘Will he be safe?’ ‘What lies ahead?’ ‘How can I go without them?’ The words of the participants echo around the room like a poem, a song of lament to accompany the poem. I think of partings I have had in my life and feel my story connected to The Arrival story through this. We later ponder: What is it to leave? What happens in that moment before taking that step outwards? Do we leave a part of ourselves behind forever?

‘We all have migration stories…’

I say this. We think about this. What is our migration story? We all have migration stories, even if we are indigenous, indigenous stories have intermingled
with stories of migration, making us who we are. We have multiple stories making up our selves. We sit in small groups and retell one story to our group – maybe the story of a grandmother who left Europe after the war, the great-grandparents who eloped and escaped, our own story of migrating from England as a young girl or from South Africa as a young boy, our husband migrating to be with us – moments of leaving loved ones – by choice, through force – stories we clearly remember – or patchy details that have passed on through the family. We select one story to work with in more detail and interview the participant whose story it is in more detail. What does the story mean? What do we know? What exactly happened? What caused the migration? What were the push and pull factors?

Capturing the Moment
I love the phrase of the French photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson, who talks about creating ‘the decisive moment’ in his photographs. He would set up the shot and then wait, sometimes for hours, for everything to come together into the decisive moment for the photograph’s creation – a nun would walk into the frame – the light would have a certain cast – things would come together to make the moment perfect. He described, ‘The simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as the precise organization of forms which gives that event its proper expression…. In photography, the smallest thing can be a great subject. The little human detail can become a leitmotif’ (Cartier-Bresson, 1972, p. 473.)

We make a still image of a moment of leaving – a decisive moment that represents the leaving, the choices being made. The significance of the leaving represented clearly in the way the forms of the still image are organised and played out. What is lost? What feelings go with that moment? We craft the image so that the moment is perfect, so that it represents everything we can see in the story. Sometimes I see participants trying different ways of moving their bodies, or using different heights to show power. Sometimes a simple dropping of the head or turning of a face will change the way that an image is read. I encourage each group to work more and more into their frozen moment – to have this picture tell the story they want to tell, to use dramatic form to reveal the truth of their chosen moment.

Process Drama and Storytelling
In process drama workshops, both students and teacher are working in and out of role to explore a problem, situation, theme or series of related ideas or themes through the use of the artistic medium of unscripted drama (O’Neill, 1995). While process drama is improvised in the sense that it is not scripted, there are a series of conventions and methodologies that give a great deal of form to the work. For instance, the drama convention that I began with in The Arrival drama, was the usage of a frozen moment or freeze frame picture. Literacy educators would be very familiar with this as a classroom strategy, and there are a myriad of different ways that a freeze frame can be worked with in a literacy classroom, to create, explore and modify stories. As a teacher works more in the process drama form, she learns more and more ways of using the convention of freeze frame as a starting point for examining the stories that we carry with us. Teachers’ work in drama practice tends to be individualistic and idiosyncratic, so when practitioners follow models created by others they approach it uniquely. You may try the ideas in this article with your class, but you will have a different way of working with the material. This uniqueness in teaching styles extends to individual classes, so your students will respond according to their own understandings and experiences, which can shape things very differently. If a drama is to be working in process, it must be open to the possibilities which unfold as it is experienced rather than working towards a pre-determined outcome (Taylor, 1995). Even when I use the same material with different groups, the drama always has a different shape. The stories described here are an amalgam of several times that I have run the drama beginning with The Arrival. Because the stories are created and modified on the go, the form quickly gets to the heart of the story.

Reading the Images Together
Together we read the images that participants have created. We work through the class image by image. Each group moves into the performance space and shows their image – finding it and then holding it for some time, as we, as audience interpret what we see. At first, interpretations are tentatively offered as we work through the elements of the image – how things are positioned, what is the tone and the message and the feeling that we get as viewers? What are we seeing here? Whose story is it? ‘The adult daughter is leaving her parents’. ‘She is taking the grandchildren’. ‘Her parents are angry and the children don’t want to go’. ‘The children want to stay behind and she is forcing them to go with her’. ‘See how she is only looking ahead to the future’. ‘She has such resolve’. ‘She does not care that she is leaving her elderly parents’. The complexities of emotion are felt and lived through the readings, multiple readings, multiple tellings of the same story – each carrying some of the truth of the moment. The young woman who initially told the story explains:
It is my grandmother’s story. She left Italy after the Second World War, with my mother, my aunt and uncle. My grandfather went first and then she joined him on a later ship. My great grandparents did not want her to go. She always said, ‘You never look back. You must always look forward’, so maybe she was thinking this when she left. When we were showing the images, someone said that it looked like I was protecting my children, and someone else thought maybe I was dragging them, that they had no choice. I realized how complicated this was for my grandmother, how maybe she was doing both things at once, and how unknown everything would be. I was a child when I first heard this story, and I had never really thought about how much courage it would have taken to have left.

Many times, during the examination and retelling of family stories, student teachers revisit their stories for the first time as adults, and develop a new significance for the telling.

We talk of the dislocation you feel when you migrate. I tell the group about a friend’s father who said to me that he has lived in Australia for more than half his life, but when he is here in Australia, he is always Spanish. Yet, when he returns to Spain, he feels Australian. Others, migrants themselves, feel connection to this idea – this dislocation of identity, this difficulty of definition and location of the self. Stories are shared. Painful stories, of being laughed at for an accent as a child migrant. I relive moments from my life of living in other places and feeling very Australian, of moments of dislocation when I feel everything has changed and my life is not my life anymore and I don’t know where I am. The multiple stories are woven upon each other as we work through each image, each one triggering more stories as we write our shared narrative of this experience of process drama with this text. Process drama enables multiple stories to be playing out simultaneously. As the young woman plays her Italian grandmother leaving home, herself as a young woman, she rethinks a moment from her grandmother’s life and revisits this moment with new understanding and empathy. As we all create moments from our own lives that parallel that depicted in The Arrival, we write our own texts together.

The Arrival is a very rich text, that can be visited and re-visited again and again, each time the reader learning something new. Barthes (1974) describes texts like these as ‘readerly texts’, which enable the reader to write themselves and their stories into the text, so that they are no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Readerly texts are ideal for process drama (Laidlaw and O’Mara, 2004). The fluidity of the form of process drama enables a story to be twisted and bent and reworked and retold in multiple ways from multiple perspectives in a single session – across time and place and space in ways that expand the thinking and experiences of those who participate in them. This is the fundamental gift that process drama gives a teacher – to be able to work through its elements, shifting time, space and stillness to reconfigure our stories of our experiences.

References


Jo O’Mara is a Senior Lecturer at Deakin University and a Research and Initiatives Officer for AATE. Later this year she is conducting a professional learning project with ALEA Victoria where practising primary teachers will develop skills in teaching process drama.