

The Crucible Project: Representing American Culture through Theatre in Education
Mátyás Agárdi, Dénes Floszник, Fanni Gombkötő, Máté Huber, Liliána Ördög-Katona

Abstract

Drama pedagogy is proven to be an effective method in foreign language education. It can help the teacher create realistic scenarios in which learners can use newly acquired language in an authentic and creative way. It can facilitate the improvement of fluency as well as lexis knowledge, moreover, it offers a chance for the learner to be familiarized with the target language's culture, or any other literary or cultural work (Dunn and Stinson 2011, 622-623), (Even 2009, 162), (Rothwell 2011, 149). In 2023, SzThEatre, a drama group consisting of future drama teachers, created a play titled "The Crucible" for high school students about high school students. The English-language play is set in a detention room that is also the set of the American classic "The Breakfast Club" (1985) and incorporates other typically American elements such as student body elections and the allegory of the American dream. Despite the title's reference to the famous American playwright Arthur Miller's work, the drama group intends to use 'crucible' as a wordplay alluding to today's society as a melting pot. The play addresses frequent issues that occur in teenagers' lives in any country, while creating a safe space by estranging the audience through cultural differences. This allows students to process these life situations through drama pedagogy while passively learning the language and becoming familiar with American culture. Educational drama is one of the most widespread educational tools nowadays, since not only does it allow learners to express themselves in a safe environment spontaneously and honestly, but their social, critical, and moral values are also challenged. This genre is also an effective instrument for training the students' critical thinking skills, while also learning how to form a critical view of their surroundings (Kaifa et. al 2020, 139-148). Visiting theatres and seeing plays has numerous educational benefits besides entertainment, like creating a more deeply rooted need for theatre in the students (Roberts 1968, 309), or teaching them sensitivity about good theatre including the play itself, the performance, and the production. Educational theatre may also aid personal development by allowing learners to encounter opinions different from theirs and helping them understand those ideas, or by motivating them to think more creatively and autonomously (Hodge, 1954, 106–19).

Keywords: drama pedagogy, high school students, American culture, educational drama, sensitivity

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future where she can inspire and guide students not only in mastering the English language but also in exploring their artistic expression through drama.

As she prepares to embark on her teaching career, Fanni looks forward to integrating her passion for both English and theatre, creating an engaging, supportive, and imaginative learning environment for her future students.

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1. Introduction

Capturing learners' attention and finding ways of effectively conveying knowledge has been an ongoing challenge since the dawn of education. These issues have only been intensified in the digital age of the twenty-first century, where digital content is getting shorter and shorter, and so do people's attention spans, resulting in a self-perpetuating cycle.

One way to combat this could be to implement more practice-based teaching methods in schools. Drama pedagogy is one example of the implied teaching methods. Apart from improving skills that are utilisable in everyday life, outside of education, drama pedagogical methods can be used not just to analyse and talk about art, but also to create art: a theatrical play. In the case of the present project, the play builds on the pop cultural, personal, and pedagogical experiences of its creators. It draws motivation from movies, TV shows, and even cartoons. This way it manages to be true to its setting, which is a high school in the United States of America. Despite the seemingly distant and different school environment, the problems and experiences that the characters go through in the play are still quite archetypal of contemporary popular and school culture worldwide. This would create the notion in teenage spectators that the events animated in the play could have been taken from their, or friends' and peers' lives, and they, too, could easily be the protagonists of the stories presented.

Since theatre is a complex genre of art, it requires a complex and multi-layered analysis to have an understanding as full as possible of theatrical pieces. However, Theatre in Education does not necessarily strive for total and complete comprehension of the piece's artistic intention and all of its subtextual meaning. Its goal is rather to familiarize the participants with the story, and the underlying mental and emotional processes of the characters. These were the artistic and pedagogical aims that our Drama group SZthEatre followed while creating and performing the play, and designing and conducting the post-performance session. The group consists of nine students and two instructors of the Department of English Language Teacher Education and Applied Linguistics and the Department of Comparative Literature Studies of the University of Szeged, Hungary.

2. Melting Pot Report: The Crucible Project and Its Cultural Background

American Corner is a multifunctional educational and cultural information center run by the U.S. Embassy in Hungary, located in various cities. American Corner provides programs that introduce local communities and individuals to American society and culture. They offer free cultural programs for all ages through presentations, interactive lectures, workshops, and camps. For example, American Corner Veszprém hosts the National English Language Drama Festival in Veszprém, an annual three-day program in late spring/early summer. During this event, Hungarian elementary school, high school, and university theater troupes perform plays in English in an authentic theater atmosphere. Each play is evaluated by theater and English language experts, followed by discussions among the groups.

To enter this festival in 2023, a group of nine university students majoring mainly in Teacher Education in English as a Foreign Language and Teacher Education in Creative Drama and Theatre established a drama troupe called SzThEatre. The troupe decided to write their own play for the festival, focusing on themes of social or cultural awareness such as diversity and

inclusion with American cultural elements, using drama pedagogical methods. The 30-minute original play was titled *The Crucible* after the 20th century American playwright Arthur Miller's play from 1953. Although the two plays share the same title, SzThEatre intended to use the word "crucible" as a metaphor for a melting pot. The troupe considers society a melting pot where individuals are included through assimilation. In Arthur Miller's play, those who were outsiders or whose behavior was unusual in Salem were accused of witchcraft, and eventually excluded and executed. The 2023 play depicts this phenomenon in our modern society, though with a different outcome: those who are not willing to melt in the crucible remain outsiders.

Another source of inspiration for the plot was the American classic *The Breakfast Club* (1985). This movie follows the story of five high schoolers who are sent to detention on a Saturday. They are all outsiders, each fitting into one stereotype, including the nerdy kid, the typical bad boy, and the princess girl. The story attempts to break down these stereotypes and reveal that there is much more to these characters than what they initially show to each other and to the audience (Kaplan 2017).

Using these two pieces of work, the troupe spent the first few rehearsals discussing common problems in people's lives, viewpoints about their generation, and questions that bothered the troupe members. It eventually seemed that in our society, people tend to hide their problems and their true selves behind masks, trying to differentiate themselves from others while ignoring their real issues. People have similar issues that could be addressed simply by talking about them, but in order to fit in or be included, people often try to communicate to the outside world that everything about them is perfect.

To project this perfection, people wear masks, just like the characters do when they enter the stage. As they arrive in the detention room, these masks fall off, and the audience gets to know the characters in depth. The play operates on two timelines, and, unlike in the original or in *Breakfast Club*, the seven characters in this version of *The Crucible* never interact with each other. Each scene is presented through drama pedagogical games, where the real struggles, problems, and motives of these characters come to the surface.

The characters were designed and fine-tuned by the actors that play them, on the basis of the aforementioned introductory rehearsal sessions, to reflect common issues and life struggles that teenagers and young adults these days often have to go through. What follows is a brief description of each of them.

Apple doesn't care about assimilation; she doesn't mask herself in order to be included, thus, she is considered the only "normal" character. She is more like an observer of the other cardboard cut-out characters. The play suggests that she knows what everyone is going through, and that she is the organizer of the events around the play, pulling the strings from behind the scenes. Her character is similar to Carl, the janitor in *The Breakfast Club*, the one who knows about everything and everyone.

Kate is a girl who projects the priority of health and a balanced lifestyle in her life. In reality, she has developed a serious eating disorder, and no matter how hard she tries to maintain a balance, she sadly cannot control herself. This is shown through a game called "Not My Hands," where Apple controls Kate's hands, feeding her apples, while the other characters on stage eat McDonald's cheeseburgers.

Patrick is a student who has to work alongside school in order to survive. At first glance, he seems to be a shy, tired student, but we learn that he lives a double life: he doesn't want others to think he is poor, so he never mentions that he has to work. He is constantly tired, has no motivation, and feels like he has no outlook for the future. In his part, the game is "Fill in The Space," where the other characters roam around the room displaying different emotions and walking styles, while Patrick is squatting in the middle of the space, seemingly hiding from them.

Meghan, the popular girl is sent to detention because of flirting with her classmate during class. She reveals that they were discussing a date, and that's what she always does –

flirt with others. But during a throwback scene and a game of “Angel and Devil,” we learn that she was sexually assaulted at one point in her life, and that’s why she acts the way she does.

Jessica, another popular girl, is partly based on Claire from *The Breakfast Club*. She comes from a wealthy family and seems to have a perfect life. To update her character for the 21st century, she is an influencer – she shares every part of herself on the internet. The only thing she does not share is the fact that she was a victim of family abuse in her childhood, which has led to her developing OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). Her story is presented through the “Interact with Me” game, where, during her monologue, she stops at each character, who in turn reacts to her differently each time.

Robert, the geek, is an excellent student. His character is based on Brian from *The Breakfast Club*. During a game called “Puppet,” the audience learns that he is constantly under pressure from his parents. They expect him to become a doctor when all he wants is to be a director. This pressure turns him into a ticking time bomb, always on the verge of a mental breakdown.

The last character, Dennis, is someone who wants to be seen as cool, and someone who doesn’t care about anything, similar to John in the movie, but without anger issues. During a game of “My Chair,” he receives an angry call from one of his parents. It is revealed that they are fed up with his poor performance at school and that he is constantly compared to his older brother David's accomplishments. In reality, it turns out that he does care about what others think of him.

These characters just want to spend detention in peace, waiting for it to finish as soon as possible. However, in this detention room, they are truly themselves, without any masks. Even though their true selves have surfaced, at the end of the play, everyone puts their masks back on because one cannot assimilate into the melting pot if they differ from the others. The 30-minute play ends with Apple's conclusion: "See? Nothing has changed," further implying that the diversity and truth that the audience has seen were just illusions.

The issues covered in the play through these characters' representation are not only important to Hungarian students; some of these issues affect every teenager's life, regardless of where they live.

3. Theatre in Education: The Drama Pedagogical Applicability of the Project

Owing to the changes occurring in our world, teachers and educators must rethink and improve their methods, how they approach both the teaching and the learning process, not leaving self-reflection out of the picture. Children should learn how to prepare for the world of work, for citizenship, for their future in the digital age (Scott 2015: 2), including learning to think more effectively, efficiently, and most importantly, critically about matters (Kaifa et al. 2020: 139). By practising critical thinking in education, students also experience the importance of truth-telling, become more open to new ideas and learn to respect their speaking or working partners (Bailin et al. 1999, cited by Kaifa et al. 2020: 139). Further necessary 21st century skills include teamwork, creativity, initiative, organising, and risk taking (Scott 2015: 1).

When applied in education, art is taken as a tool for shaping the spirit and the morals of students (Jörissen et al. 2018, cited by Kaifa et al. 2020: 139). Drama has a playful form, and a multi-layered role since it encourages all recipients, both children and adults to engage both their body and their souls (Baldwin 2009, cited by Kaifa et al. 2020: 139). With educational theatre, students may practise expressing themselves and their values more freely, learn the fundamental rules of democracy, but can also allow themselves to inspect their world and their surroundings more critically (Bolton 1984, cited by Kaifa et al. 2020: 140). The utmost aim of educational drama is also self-improvement, yet it can also aid teachers in building the community. With well-known stories, like Batman, the Minions, Robin Hood or Spider-Man, moral and ethical questions and decisions can be discussed from younger ages even, but other social issues can be dealt with by simply involving students with the right activities, and making

them actively participate (Tölgyessy 2018). According to Falus (2001, cited by Tölgyessy 2018), teachers employ simulation, games, and role-play in the teaching process as it makes the learning situation highly lifelike. Games create a safe learning environment, erase the psychological burden and anxiety, and make the learning procedure much more effective. Theatre in Education (TIE) may also help create a need in learners for the experience of theatre (Roberts 1968: 309).

After the aforementioned drama festival in Veszprém, the SzThEatre troupe decided to perform *The Crucible* in several Hungarian secondary schools, followed by a post-performance discussion session each time. As it was around 45 minutes long, long-term development could not be reached in such a short amount of time. Nonetheless, the play itself and the activities included in the session managed to make the students wonder about the mentioned everyday life issues (eating disorders, poor financial status, prejudice, the expectations of our surroundings and past traumas), helping them reflect on these topics, find points by which they can identify with the cases and attempt to find partial solutions for certain situations themselves, among many others.

The post-performance discussion session was compiled by three teacher trainees majoring in drama and theatre arts, and a drama teacher currently teaching drama in high school as well as drama and theatre methodology at the University of Szeged. Neither the play, nor the post-performance session require any special tools or settings, thus they can be carried out in any classroom. The general seating arrangement was a circle, which provided exposure for everyone during the plenary discussions, as they could make more eye contact during the session. It made the activities feel more like a natural communicational situation (Scrivener 2011: 63), and a common group experience as well, strengthening the relationships within the classes.

The session's warm-up activity was an association game, where the students had to choose one word or expression which came to their mind about the play. It could be about how they liked the performance, what emotions it made them feel, what moments or problems caught their attention, etc. This was their first step of identifying themselves with the piece as they had to find points by which their lives connected to the story. It may serve as a great tool to make learners more conscious about how theatre, but generally arts are about our lives and have something for everyone. The exercise also challenged its participants to speak their minds, which can actually be a challenge in the teenage years, yet its practice is undoubtedly essential.

The main body of the session comprised of group work activities, for which the students formed six groups, and randomly chose one character of the story. For their first exercise, "Character on the Wall," they received a simple, hand-drawn figure of a person, completely blank, and their task was to write expressions on the paper which they believe are connected to that certain character. They could mention personality traits, events that happened to that person, their problems, or difficulties, and if possible, even a nickname which they believe the people surrounding them could have addressed the character with. They also had to present their ideas to the whole class, which was then followed by a discussion together. It is an activity that allows the students to look into a character more deeply and motivates them to understand their actions better, thus, to be more empathic. They were challenged to express their opinions freely, but also to listen to perspectives different from their own.

In the following task, each group had to create three still images, and present them to the class. The stills had to illustrate a class and its members before, during, and after the conflict between Robert and his teacher, based on how the students themselves envisioned it. This task demanded creativity from the learners, but also organisational skills, since they had to assemble these stills including multiple ideas. In an exercise like this, problem-solving skills are often triggered while discussing the structure.

Throughout the next activity, the whole class created one big "icy image" about a scene when Patrick was being bullied while working at his job. This concept was rather similar to the previous one (with the still images), however, in this case all participants were "put on speaker"

later. When everyone had taken their place, the session leaders started touching the participants' shoulders one by one, and they had to say a sentence they believed their character would say in that situation. In this case, the participants had to be creative and choose from several resources: they could rely on their personal experiences and knowledge about the world; however, they could also try to act in a way they would not dare to in real life. As many role-play situations, this activity may also aid self-discovery, which is essential to practice in teenage years. Not to mention that its game-like form and the familiar surroundings and audience provide a safe environment for the learners to try out new things.

During the "Before-After" game, the students' task was to write two Facebook Messenger conversations including the character of Meghan. One had to occur two days before the incident, and another had to be two days after it. This exercise challenged both their imagination, and their creativity. It put great power in the hands of the participants since they could alter the surroundings of the story, like giving the character a happy ending or making the consequences even more tragic. It demanded identification with the characters, both while constructing the conversation within the group and while they reflected on the solutions of others. The activity can be used to demonstrate how we can help each other by paying attention to them, and that if we see warning signs, we can help by asking, or simply being there for those who are important for us.

In "Family Constellation", the groups were given slips with a name of a character whose problems were rooted in relationships with their family members or their role in the family (Kate, Jessica and Dennis), and a few sentences which could have been said by their parents. The task was to discuss the reasons behind the behaviour of the parents and think about what that character would have said if they had the chance/courage/etc. to stand up for themselves. After the discussion, a session leader sat in a "hot seat" in front of the class and listened to the sentences as a parent of the given character without answering them. The students practised their critical thinking skills since they had to take multiple factors into consideration, be empathic and try to think with the brain of others, but also generally during teamwork, while encountering new perspectives. Moral questions can be discussed effectively in such a natural setting, which aids both comprehension and identification. Furthermore, the activity may also highlight the importance of communicating our feelings, and standing up for ourselves. Reflections and discussion after the conflict may also help the students to understand what differences communication may make in relationships and raise awareness about social issues.

In the close-up activity of the post-performance session, the students had to work individually again, and finish the sentence "It would be better if people would..." After seeing the story, getting to know its characters, the questions and societal problems surrounding them more thoroughly and from several perspectives, the learners had to formulate their own conclusion. Not only did it help them practice self-reflection, but it also motivated them to consciously think about the things that have been discussed and decide to which they can relate the most, or which touched them the most. Answers at this exercise may serve as useful indicators for the teacher about the problems concerning their students, which can be topics discussed during lessons later on.

4. Conclusion

After a year of performing *The Crucible* to various audiences, the SzThEatre troupe got many acknowledgements. It has been suggested by a professional jury that the concept of archetypical characters appearing in the play could be brought into correspondence with the archetypical roles of the Italian Commedia dell'arte theatre tradition. Although the choice of music (Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall*) was criticized for being too didactic, the use of puppetry and pantomime was praised. Opinions from adult audiences were similar to what the secondary school students said about the play, although the real breakthrough came with the roadshow in secondary schools. The high school students commented on the story being "real",

“believable”, “based on true stories” and “enlightening”. Some of them spoke very honestly and openly about their personal experiences and expressed their opinions fiercely, clashing with the opinions of other classmates, “taking off their masks” just like the characters of the play, and calling out those who were thought to be inconsistent and dishonest.

Taking our experiences and the feedback into account, it is safe to state that the drama pedagogical project with *The Crucible* was successful in bringing secondary school students closer to the serious themes of the play, those which could easily have been a part of their lives. Thanks to its unique blend of American and Hungarian school life and pop culture, *The Crucible* managed to have insights about teenage life, but also witty and relatable humour that could make a wide range of audiences laugh. The diverse usage of performative techniques helped to invoke many different feelings and emotions about the play and gave a solid foundation of thoughts to work with during the sessions following the performances. The play and the post-performance session provide a great framework for TIE (theatre in education) projects and quality performances with a pedagogical aim.

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