

Curriculum perspectives: K–12 Drama

Dr Christine Hatton, Drama Advisor K–12, Curriculum K–12 Directorate,
NSW Department of Education and Training

**Transcript of paper, *Stitching up the past: progressing the Australian Dress Register seminar*,
16 November 2009**

I will be talking about the ways in which the Australian Dress Register (ADR) might link to the drama curriculum in NSW. In drama, we come at 'design' quite differently because for us the theatrical experience and performance are the focus of our work. From Kindergarten through to Year 12, the three areas of the NSW drama curriculum involve *making* drama, *performing* drama & *critically studying*, particularly in the senior years, or *appreciating* drama in the junior years. Throughout their schooling students are required to reflect on their own drama making and performance in drama. There are many different types of drama students can study over that time but the two key drama forms or contexts are *improvisation* and *playbuilding*. These are really the nuts and bolts of the drama curriculum in NSW and elsewhere. The main premise is that school students learn about the art form by making the art form and working with its elements in real and practical ways. In drama, improvisation and playbuilding involves students learning how to collaboratively create and present plays of their own invention. Within these processes they learn to take on roles; they learn to explore and enact stories; and walk inside the shoes of others; they learn to manipulate the elements of drama; and they also learn to collaborate to devise pieces of theatre for different audiences and for different purposes.

'Costume' in the context of drama is connected to the theatrical experience. It is an important means of communicating role and dramatic situation to an audience. It also gives information to an audience about relationships within the play such as how characters are linked by colour or design as well as crucial contextual information such as the place and time depicted onstage. In drama teaching we also use costume as role signifiers or symbols that can drive the dramatic action. Hats and shawls are very common pieces of costume in the drama classroom particularly in primary school because they can be

adapted and used to become all sorts of characters that drive the storytelling and the drama along.

In K–6 costumes feature very much in terms of giving students and audience character information and helping the children to adopt roles, tell their stories and engage in the fiction. Students might select something from the dress up box (they will not be making them), or something from home (such as mum's old clothes) to bring to life a role or character in the classroom. Students would then appreciate their drama work as they make decisions about appropriate clothes for a particular character and reflect on the way costume communicated particular ideas to their audience.

In their study of drama in Years 7–10 we see a growing sophistication in the way that students approach the artwork. Their creative processes, performance work and critical analysis are more sophisticated. At these stages the drama syllabus focuses on more explicit learning about the particular theatrical function of costume and how costume design works alongside the other design elements such as lighting design, set design, sound design and even promotional design in terms of publicising key aspects of a production to a potential audience. The drama study becomes more specialised and students start to look at characterisation and acting technique more specifically and how costume can enliven and embolden their performances.

This growing sophistication continues into Year 11 and 12 drama. There is a specific study of costume design as an artistic process in itself. Students might consider how a designer might get the creative stimulation to create a design piece that suits a particular production or director's vision. Study in drama at senior level also involves a more detailed study of acting as a craft and performance from different theatrical traditions. Class work focuses more deeply on the analysis of context, form and performance conventions. In senior drama students consider questions such as: when

did this play occur? Where did it occur? What is the particular social milieu and political context that informed this work? What techniques have been used to engage the audience in the performance? For their HSC Drama Individual Project students can choose to complete a costume design project, where they must select play text from a given list and then create a series of costume designs for an imagined production. In the Group Performance component of the HSC Drama course students must playbuild in small groups and create a short piece of original theatre for live performance. They also complete a written exam where they write about particular plays and performances drawing upon their knowledge and their experiences of the plays in performance.

So what kinds of things could drama teachers and students use the ADR for?

Obviously it serves as a great resource for costume design and research for students. It is particularly nice to have a local body of material for students to look at. For me the most exciting thing about the ADR as a resource is what it offers as means of triggering ideas for playbuilding for students as they make their own theatrical works. For us in drama the stories behind the garments are really exciting. We could explore what kinds of personal narratives are highlighted by these garments, and these could be starting points for playbuilding for different audiences — school based, for festivals and also for curriculum-based work. The stories behind the garments provide us with a real sense of the local, the everyday and the particular. These are interesting triggers that teachers could use as starting points for all kinds of drama work from Years K–12. For instance, I can see a Year 12 group using those underpants as a wonderful starting point for a HSC Group Performance piece because the moment you look at them you can imagine a story. I can see a K–6 drama project using the gum blossom costume as a base for a story or playbuilding looking at how children see Australia

today compared with the past. The arts act as a critical medium for generating dialogue about who we are and how we represent ourselves. I can see drama works created by students based on what they find in the ADR. In the field of contemporary theatre and also in the HSC Drama Course Prescriptions there is a huge new interest in stories and storytelling and in particular a new form of theatre called 'Verbatim Theatre' which HSC students are just starting to study for the first time. These are stories taken from communities and developed into plays. Dialogue is based on the verbatim transcripts from people who experienced various events in their communities. The interest in personal stories and the contexts in which people live their lives are very rich starting points for drama. I can also see lots of possibilities for cross curricula work between different Key Learning Areas using drama and the arts as a way of exploring the leaps of imagination we and our students get when we learn about these garments.

Another thing worth mentioning is about students and teachers having new access through the register to regional stories. This register gives students access, students who may not have had this before. Students in government schools in particular now have access to online resources and environments with the recent statewide laptop rollout. The laptops have become part of our classrooms and students can open them and connect with each other and with materials like these in ways that they have never been able to do before. With technology we can bring alive the information and the stories of these garments and students can learn from these stories. In drama these garments can fuel students' imaginations and their creative work. So I guess it is about how far our imaginations can take us in terms of using a web-based register like this one.

Thank you for asking me to be a part of this event and I hope we can do some more work together in the future.

Australian Dress Register, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney

+ PO Box K346 Haymarket NSW 1238 Australia + Telephone (02) 9217 0220
+ Facsimile (02) 9217 0355 + Email dressregister@pdm.gov.au

The Powerhouse Museum, part of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences also incorporating Sydney Observatory, the Powerhouse Discovery Centre and the NSW Migration Heritage Centre, is a NSW government cultural institution.
© 2010 Trustees of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.