

The Application of Workshops in Literature Teaching: A Case Study of the Dramatic Adaptation of *Jane Eyre**

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This paper focuses on the essential practicality of dramatic workshops in the teaching of literature. It employs the example of the dramatic adaptation of *Jane Eyre* in English Literature class to illustrate how the process of background study, improvisation, status game, mock debate, and hot-seating enables students to have a profound understanding of the 19th-century masterpiece and discuss the potentials of workshops in literature teaching. The case study stresses the importance of research-oriented teaching in literature, aiming to train students' comprehensive abilities of close reading, attentive listening, speaking, writing, and critical thinking.

Keywords: dramatic workshop, adaptation, research-oriented teaching, critical thinking

Introduction

One trend in the methodology of foreign literature teaching is the exploration of research-oriented teaching, which focuses on the cultivation of students' problem consciousness and comprehension, through the close reading of literary works and question-based seminar-style teaching (WEI, 2016, p. 174). In years of literature teaching, the author of this paper has tried to provoke students' interest in literature and enhance their appreciative and analytical ability in literary reading. She has made good use of theatre workshops in literary classes and found their great potentials in teaching literature. This year, the author applied for Practicality Teaching, a biannual project granted by the Teaching Affairs Office of Central University of Finance and Economics, which encourages teachers and students to extend in-class learning to out-of-class learning and aims to enhance students' autonomy in learning. The participants are the senior students who take *English Literature* this semester and will take *American Literature* next semester. In their second year, they took *Introduction to Literature*. From her years of teaching, the author has found that students rarely read plays. Therefore, she wants them to be more immersed in drama. And as theatre-making is a collaborative activity, students are to learn to do team-work. The project requires students to complete the adaptation of the 19th-century masterpiece *Jane Eyre* and then perform it on stage. The author chooses *Jane Eyre*, because the novel will be analyzed in the Victorian Literature; adapting the novel into a drama will adequately prepare students for profound reading of the work in class. The author wants to use the novel as a paradigm to show students how to conduct in-depth reading of literary work and learn about the use of literature.

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This task-oriented process takes 10 weeks. Twenty students are divided into six groups of three or four students. Each group is required to select some chapters (the selection should be different) and adapt them into a scene, which should be entitled. The six groups need to discuss and find a structure for the six scenes, putting them into a certain order. And then each group writes the script of the scene. Together they produce a complete six-scene play. The play will be finally performed. Students should strictly follow the steps and accomplish the tasks out of the class.

This paper traces the whole process of the dramatic adaptation of *Jane Eyre* in English Literature class to illustrate how the process of background study, improvisation, status game, mock debate, and hot-seating enables students to have a profound understanding of the novel and discuss the potentials of workshops in literature teaching. The case study stresses the importance of research-oriented teaching in literature, aiming to train students' comprehensive abilities of close reading, attentive listening, speaking, writing, and critical thinking.

The paper will start with the wide application of workshops in play writing and its application to literature teaching, and then elaborates on the steps of students' dramatic adaptation of *Jane Eyre* and analyzes the results of this project to demonstrate how dramatic adaptation and workshops can effectively contribute to literary teaching.

What Is Workshop? And Its Benefits

Workshop is a frequently used word in theatre community.

Historically, the theatre workshop was organized within a loosely structured performing group; the workshop itself functioned in two basic capacities: first and foremost, as a place to get away from dogmatic acting classes in order to explore new ideas and, second, as a practical way to make a production that could reflect personal values of the group rather than the standard theatrical values of commercial theatre. (Argelander, 1978, p. 4)

Workshop usually includes background research, improvisations, status games, and hot-seating. It was fully utilized by Joint Stock which was initially headed by Artistic Director Max Stafford-Clark. "The group nurtured collaborative methods of developing productions through a period of workshopping together, in which they researched the subject material, and explored attitudes towards issues involved and the possible ways to show these" (Tycker, 2008, p. 40). This methodology was then widely used by Max Stafford-Clark when he was the Artistic Director at the Royal Court Theatre with several famous contemporary British playwrights. It has also been favoured by many avant-garde theatres and feminist theatres, such as Women's Theatre Group and Monstrous Regime, to produce feminist plays since the 1970s. The method turned out to be very effective. It encourages innovation and experimentation and invokes the vitality and force of drama. The playwright's collaboration with the director and actors in the different stages of writing proves to be very productive. It gives the playwright a chance to experiment with dramatic forms and contents and to have more to say in the rehearsal of the play.

Such a method is also introduced to literary classes in Britain and U.S.A., especially in the drama class. "The creative writer could take the improvisations as creative writing prompts to begin stream of consciousness monologues or scenes. Students can especially utilize the discussions and debates to start them writing about and analyzing the play" (Tycker, 2008, p. 85). Debby Turner gives a vivid account of how she employs Max Stafford-Clark's techniques and adds some of her own to guide students through Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Our Country's Good* in class. She applauds this working method as fruitful (Bush, 2013, pp. 167-180).

Elaine Showalter proposes a “student-centred, humanistic and dialogic” teaching approach (qtd. in Bajner, 2005, p. 239). She remarked that teachers should avoid developing “phony” or “showy” teaching styles; instead, they should learn from the performing arts and turn students into “players, rather than passive listeners and spectators” (qtd. in Bajner, 2005, p. 239).

Famous directors, such as Peter Brook, Bertolt Brecht, and Max Stafford-Clark, have encouraged their ensembles to do workshops, to improvise, which are quite enjoyable and effective in scriptwriting and directing. For the author, a class is like an ensemble; the familiarity of students creates a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere for acting and collaboration. Introducing workshops in English literature class is to leave the restricting atmosphere of teaching, give a full play to students’ autonomy and team-work, and help them to build scaffolding. They are to learn through “trial-and-error” (Argelander, 1978, p. 4). Instead of being bludgeoned into passivity in the traditional literary class, where teachers direct the discussion of the work, with this new teaching approach, students learn to do a number of things both on his/her own and in collaboration. They should conduct a thorough research on background information (social, historical, and literary contexts) and on existing criticism, identifying the predominant themes, doing character analysis, finding the contemporary resonance of the work, etc. They need to explore new ideas and immerse themselves into the details of the novel. Thus reading is full of fun.

The Application of Workshops in the Adaptation of *Jane Eyre*

The author first introduces students to the idea and practice of workshops prevailing in American and British drama communities and literary classes. Feminist drama is taken as a specimen to show the features of drama—its basic elements, structure, dramatic conflict, and to elaborate the difference between novel and drama. Students can also refer to *The Architecture of Drama*, an introductory work. Other salient features of the feminist theatre, such as episodic structure, entitled scene, role-doubling, and drag performance, are highlighted with dramatic examples. The author encourages the students to adapt the novel by employing these features.

After the preliminary preparation, students are ready to start. The following steps are strictly taken.

First, close reading of *Jane Eyre*, which takes two weeks. A good adaptation is based on the profound and in-depth understanding of the original work, therefore, students start with the close reading of *Jane Eyre*. Students should be aware of the primacy of the text. Then they write responsive/reaction papers, recording their genuine responses during the first encounter with the characters, themes, and social milieu of the work, no matter how raw it is. This helps them to sort out their ideas and find out what puzzles them.

Second, two-week research on background and criticism to increase the understanding of social, cultural, and psychological phenomena. Students read about the following issues in the 19th century: gender discriminations, poverty, madness, marriage institution, job opportunity for women, etc. (Students brainstorm this list). Each student will focus on one or two issues and do the research, and then share the findings with their partners. Another reason for this research is that the author wants them to see how *Jane Eyre* highlights the social issues of the 19th century. For instance, knowing the first son inheritance system and governess’s social status of the time enables them to know more about the impediment in the relation between Jane and Rochester and Bertha’s wretched situation.

Third, viewing of multifarious adaptations. As this is their first time to do dramatic adaptation, the author shows various dramatic and film adaptations of *Jane Eyre* in class, so that they can have a better understanding of the genre of drama. These adaptations include China’s National Theatre version starring Yuan Quan as Jane

and Wang Luo-yong as Rochester and NT Live version. The teacher will direct their attention to the different emphases and shifting focuses in the adaptations and ask them to explore the reasons for such differences. For instance, there is a BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) program entitled “Bronte Sisters”, which introduces various film and TV play adaptations of *Jane Eyre* from the 1950s to the 1980s in Britain. The program concludes that the different views of marriage, the image of women and male-female relationship, and women’s liberation have influenced the adaptations. This helps students to see the different dramatic possibilities and locate the focus of their own adaptation.

Fourth, to select the chapters (one week). Before making the decision, students should share their findings and their interpretations of the work among the group and thrust the themes of the work. The following is the list of their choice, which shows that the students mainly read *Jane Eyre* as a love story, a Cinderella story:

Group One: Chapter 23

Group Two: Chapters 26, 27

Group Three: Chapter 17

Group Four: Chapters 36, 37, 38

Group Five: Chapters 7, 8, 9

Group Six: Chapter 4

The author notices that Group Two selects the chapter concerning Bertha and later finds in their adaptation that she is characterized rather differently from the novel: She marries Rochester for money; she is cunning and manipulative; most importantly, she speaks up. This is an interesting point worthy of attention. The author will come back to it in the “Findings” section.

Fifth, to decide on the sequence of the scenes (one week). The original work is an autobiography. Jane’s life is narrated from the first-person perspective in a chronological order. The China’s National Theatre version shows an intriguing treatment of the temporal sequence. It starts with Jane’s coming to Thornfield as a governess, while her childhood life is treated as fragments of her memory, with young and adult Jane appearing on stage at the same time. The author asks the students to consider if there are other possibilities to disrupt the chronological order and encourages them to be imaginative and innovative.

Sixth, to write the script within three weeks. The author mentioned the importance of workshopping in playwriting at the beginning of the project. One example will suffice to show its potential. The contemporary English woman playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker employs this method quite successfully with director Max Stafford-Clark at Royal Court Theatre when composing *Our Country’s Good*, based on Australian writer Thomas Keneally’s novel *Playmaker*. Both she and Max Stafford-Clark have talked on various occasions about the effectiveness of using improvisations, status games, and hot-seating to create the characters, find the right tone, and thrust the theme of the play (Bush, 2013, pp. 143-161). Students are encouraged to use these methods in the characterization of Jane and Rochester, for instance, to improvise scenes that best expose the characteristics of the protagonists. Two students act out the garden scene, in which Jane reveals her feelings for Rochester. The one who personates Jane tells the audience after the improvisation that in the scene Jane shows her bravery, her passion, and her dignity mingled with slight trace of inferior complex.

Another scene is how little Jane is maltreated by her cousins. A student puts forward an interesting question: In spite of the maltreatment and lack of familial tenderness and care, how does Jane not turn into a

bitter person? In order to find the answer, they play the status game and hot-seating. Students take turns to play Jane, the question is put to her, and they are expected to give a quick answer. They offer various answers: because of her friendship with angelic Helen at the boarding school, who teaches her how to love; because Jane seems to be immune to the vicious environment; because Jane is always capable of taking in positive forces from her surroundings; because Jane gains strength from her reading, etc. Students enjoy the games. A lot of ideas are sparked during the process. They feel they know more about Jane. She is no longer a fictive figure; instead she is their sister, whom they admire, respect, and feel related to in some way.

After various improvisations, status games, and hot-seating, students are ready to write. The final script is composed of six scenes:

Scene I deals with Jane's first encounter with Mr. Brocklehurst at Aunt Reed's home.

Scene II tells about the Jane's life and friendship with Helen at the boarding school.

Scene III deals with Jane's increasing affectation for Mr. Rochester after the fire accident and her suffering from jealousy of Miss Ingram.

Scene IV deals with the most important scene in the novel, when Jane and Mr. Rochester reveal their affection to each other in the garden.

Scene V tells about what happens during and after the wedding between Jane and Mr. Rochester. Bertha's brother exposes the secret of Rochester's former marriage and Jane is dumbfounded and decides to leave Thornfield.

Scene VI deals with the reunion of Jane and Mr. Rochester. Jane returns to Thornfield and lives happily with Mr. Rochester who lost his eyesight and rendered crippled in the fire. In two years, they are having a baby girl.

During the rehearsal, a group comes to the author and asks if they can invite other students to help in the performance, because they are short in actors. The author asks them to try role-doubling and drag performance, which are quite common in the feminist theatre. The author introduced to the students the role-doubling and drag performance with examples from Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* at the very beginning; it seems they did not take in. So the author avails herself of the opportunity to stress the importance of role-doubling and drag performance. Role-doubling means that an actor plays multiple roles in the play. These roles are usually hugely different. For instance, he can play both a high-ranking officer and a convict in the same play or both a man and a woman in the same play, so as to deconstruct the class and gender system. Drag performance means an actress plays a man or vice versa or a black plays a white and vice versa, in this way the performance challenges the binary oppositions and conventions, thus disrupting the hierarchy.

British and American women playwrights use these methods quite commonly: on the one hand, because of theatre's limited resources; on the other hand, because these methods help to subvert the socially constructed concepts like gender, race, and class. The author asks them to consider if they can send some subversive messages by using these methods.

The premiere is fabulous. Students use different methods to do the production. Mainly they use the realistic method. They use powerpoints to project the setting. Music is played to suggest the mood and create the atmosphere. Desks serve as beds. Students in Act III pay special attention to props. Wine, glasses, coffee, tea pot, and knitting work. Every detail suggests the good preparation. Act VI uses expressionistic method,

where actors running on the stage suggest the wagon. Jane takes off her coat and makes it a bundle to symbolize the new-born. The author is deeply impressed by students' wonderful imagination, performance, and involvement. Each student is an active participant, taking up different roles in the whole project and demonstrating their various talents and good collaboration.

What We Can Learn From the Project: Findings and How It Promotes the Further Study of the Novel

After the premiere, the author puts the question to the students: Why did they give a slight attention to Bertha's story in the adaptation? Many of them consider it natural not to tell Bertha's story, because the novel is about the romance between Jane and Rochester. Bertha appears on only a few pages of the novel.

Some say that Bertha is repulsive. They feel uncomfortable with her animalistic behavior and her insanity. She is locked up in the attic and always howls and crawls. She seems to be erased from Rochester's life. Rochester thinks of her only when she imposes threat to his marriage with Jane. In a word, she is invisible.

As to the change Group Five has made in the drama, they say they feel Bertha is a minefield; anyhow, they want to give her some humanity, who can speak instead of howling. The author is pleased that students have noticed these details. The author wants them to think further: What causes the invisibility or marginality of Bertha? What is their interpretation of Bertha's animalism? Do they see any connection between Jane and Bertha?

The author asks them to read again the chapters related to Bertha and see if they can find any textual evidence. Students are involved in heated discussions. And the author thinks it is time to introduce post-colonialism and psychoanalysis. She recommends two books *A Madwoman in the Attic* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The former is an insightful analysis of Bertha from a postcolonial perspective and the latter is the prequel to *Jane Eyre*, telling about Bertha's life in West Indie and her marriage with Rochester and subsequent exploitation and racial and sexual discrimination she suffers when taken to England.

Critics hold that as a Creole, Bertha is demonized and rendered invisible by the society. Bertha is the Other, the non-human, the projection of British people's fear of the unknown, uncivilized culture or threat. Her silence and invisibility is a way to reduce the disturbance. Bertha also symbolizes the darker double of Jane, the subconscious. Her madness and Jane's rationality are just two sides of a person. Jane tries to repress her passion, which she is afraid will bring her to the abyss of destruction.

Though such readings are not new now, students hear it for the first time. And they are excited with the multiple interpretations of the novel. They begin to see the racial and cultural discrimination embodied in the novel and learn to read the novel as more than a Cinderella story or *Buildungsroman*.

Teaching literature is not simply about the appreciation of the story, characterization, and language; more importantly, it is about teaching social policy, history, and culture, etc. (Cnaan, 1989, p. 181). The author wants the students to understand that when Bronte wrote *Jane Eyre*, she did not write a mere romantic potboiler. Her novel has serious things to say about a number of important subjects: the relations between men and women, women's equality, the treatment of children and of women, religious faith and religious hypocrisy, the realization of selfhood, and nature of true love. What is more, students' failure to pay adequate attention to Bertha pinpoints one of Bronte's implicit considerations: her ideas about British Empire and racism. By decoding the novel in the context of British Empire and colonization, students learn more about the social milieu in the 19th century.

Conclusion

Dramatic adaptation and workshopping help to activate students and encourage them to explore answers and avoid stock response. And it also stresses the concept of teamwork. It is more rewarding than just following the teacher's A, B, and C. The prominent Canadian critic Northrop Frye remarked, "Literary education is not doing the whole of its proper work unless it marshals the verbal imagination against the assaults of advertising and propaganda that try to bludgeon us into passivity" (qtd. in Jewkes, 1976, p. 281). Literature is supposed to have much effect on the mental habits of the students and help them break the stereotypes. And the best way to teach literature is to experience it (Thompson, 1985, p. 108). As a teacher of foreign literature, the author hopes that what we have experienced in the project can serve as a paradigm for in-depth reading of literary works, a rewarding reading experience that will bring about some changes to our lives.

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