

THE
DRAMA
TEACHER'S
SURVIVAL
GUIDE

MATTHEW
NICHOLS

'This is a terrific and instructive book, and an essential reminder of how inspiring and empowering a good drama teacher can be.'

SIR NICHOLAS HYTNER

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Teacher's
Survival Guide**

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Matthew Nichols

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*This book is dedicated to Isabel and Roger,
my favourite teachers.
And to Jonathan, who survived.*

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Preface: An anecdote

Gather round the metaphorical fire, if you will, and I'll pass on a story which has been passed down from drama teacher to drama teacher, through the ages. If it helps to visualize, all of these drama teachers are dressed in layers of scarves, much like Stevie Nicks.

Actually, this is an anecdote which I was given to ponder over nearly twenty years ago, when I was about to study for my PGCE in Secondary Drama. It's an anecdote which has often bounced back to me in a vacant moment, and is one that is worth reasoning through every now and again. At the very least, it gives an indication as to how the idea of drama teaching in schools sits within the broader framework of education.

In 1988, the Conservative government introduced the Education Reform Act, and part of this was the first statutory National Curriculum. Essentially: a prescriptive framework of every school-age child's educational entitlement, and what teachers and schools *must* cover. The notion had been put in place by Labour Prime Minister Jim Callaghan more than a decade earlier, so this wasn't merely a vogueish political tool seized on by Thatcher's ministers. Education Minister (a job which has seemingly held the same level of public popularity as Judas Iscariot) Kenneth Baker was at the forefront of this genuinely revolutionary and noble quest. Whilst the first Programmes of Study were tentatively rolled out to the teaching community in 1988 with at least one collective

eyebrow quizzically raised, the legwork to put together this behemoth was done during rounds of meetings, discussions, panels and focus groups during the mid-1980s. Rumour persists that some of these discussions actually took on board the views of teachers.

Every subject was, in turn, debated. Some subjects (English, Maths, Sciences) were determined as 'core' and a vital, essential and central part of every child's compulsory schooling. With hindsight, it's perhaps strange that Computing wasn't also given its place as a core subject, as Britain stood at the dawn of a digital age which would redefine how children learned and how teachers taught. Not to matter; Information Technology (as it was labelled) found its place within the wider National Curriculum. As did History, Geography, Languages, Art, Music, Physical Education and many others. The greatest and most wide-reaching educational reform of modern-day England ... and no sign of drama. To date, drama does not feature in the National Curriculum. It never has done. Drama does not exist as a discrete subject in its own right, and it seems as though successive educational reforms, regardless of political breezes, are intent on keeping it that way. Yes, in English Literature, children will study plays and it's a requirement. Like an old sideboard, repainted over the years to keep with the trends of the day, further reforms to the National Curriculum have seen drama given the odd nod in a paragraph here, a sentence there, but fundamentally: drama doesn't exist. Why? Here comes the anecdote.

Apparently, in those crucial discussions which would redefine the entire modern educational landscape, eventually it became the turn of drama to be placed under the metaphorical spotlight. Centre stage. Jazz hands. Well, yes, went one school of thought. Drama *must* have a place in the new National Curriculum; how could it not? Shakespeare! The greatest writer of any age; his plays and poems are the beating heart of our national consciousness. We have an entire heritage

industry built around our theatre history, our plays and playwrights, our world-class actors and the actor training that has developed here. Children *must*, the school of thought went, have access to drama as a subject in its own right as part of the National Curriculum. Exit stage left, pursued by a barely audible round of applause.

On the other hand, the opposing school of thought went, we need to be careful. Drama is essentially countercultural; it encourages challenges to authority and tradition. Drama will teach children how to be radical, to question, and to not unquestioningly accept what they are told. English Literature could, surely, the school of thought went, cover Shakespeare and our great dramatic heritage. But by including drama in the new National Curriculum, it would be paving the way for generations of children to be taught how to be rebellious, how to demand accountability from their elders, and potentially unleashing rivers of social unrest. And as for the teachers of this subject? Let's not even go there.

The debate was, I have been assured, keenly fought by both sides, each desperate to make their case and to ensure that drama was properly scrutinized as a subject. No other subject was held up to this level of scrutiny and debate. This has always puzzled me. Why, for example, wasn't Music debated in such a way? Nevertheless, an agreement could not be reached, so it came down to a vote. An actual 'yes or no' vote. Whether future generations of children would have access to drama as a discrete subject or not was whittled down to a binary choice because some Thatcherite ministers and political know-it-alls were cautious or sceptical about where the inclusion of the subject might lead.

You know the punchline. You know how the vote went. The ministers arguing for drama's inclusion on the inaugural National Curriculum lost – by *one* vote. That's how close it was. And that is why drama has not and does not play a part in our National

Curriculum. My own views on this have changed over the years; mild outrage and mumbling about ‘political injustice’ in my early twenties have simmered to a much more relaxed position where I am – ultimately – pleased that drama doesn’t play a part in the National Curriculum. I relish the flexibility it brings and embrace the challenges that come with that. I love the freedom it affords me and the opportunities to devise a curriculum which suits the needs of my students.

Hang on. Design a curriculum? That sounds like an awful lot of extra work, especially compared with other subjects. And this ‘freedom’ it affords you? Isn’t that just spin for the fact that you have to start with a blank page every time and do an awful lot more work than your colleagues in some other subjects? I’ll abstain from answering. What I will say, and what I do know, after fifteen years of teaching drama in secondary schools and sixth form colleges, is that the job is as brilliant, terrifying, exhilarating, creative, frustrating and all-encompassing as it ever was. Those meetings and debates and that vote in the mid-1980s link directly to *you* holding this book today. Those men and women, all big hair and braces, put the foundations in place for where we find ourselves today. The questions and challenges remain the same, but the landscape is seismically different. How, then, with this vast open landscape in front of you, do you survive as a drama teacher? Never mind just surviving; how might you *thrive* in the profession? How do you, dare I say it, excel and be brilliant? I hope that this book might hold some of the answers to those questions.

Introduction

Creativity in schools

Whilst it isn't just each year's crop of Oscar, BAFTA or Olivier award-winning actors who can readily answer the question, it's interesting to notice just how often professional theatre makers can and do reference their earliest acting experience, when asked. Invariably, professional actors remember: that first school play, the local youth theatre group they joined, the inspirational drama teacher who nurtured and encouraged their creativity. Actors talk about this stuff in interviews all the time; let's not, then, underestimate both the impact that drama can and does have on a child and also how vividly the memories are ingrained. Personally speaking, I can't remember what I had for dinner two nights ago, but I can recall, with pinpoint clarity, the moment that my junior school drama teacher thought that there was a part for me in the school play. Unluckily for her, I also realized that by veering from the script and winking at the audience, I could steal the limelight and detract from the main plot. I bet she rues that day.

In these formative years of education, drama is often a highlight for the youngest learners; it's fun and often not thought of as a subject in the way that maths or phonics might be. It's essentially active. You can't really get very far by being a passive participant. It requires energy

and effort and commitment. It doesn't involve desks or a traditional classroom environment. For some people (children and adults alike) the empty space, the black box, the drama studio, the school hall stage is liberating. The sense of play and fun is inherent and creativity can be harnessed and realized, and that empty space is the perfect blank canvas on which to explore. To others, it's sheer terror; the lack of desks and chairs is exposing and cold and frightening and please-don't-look-at-me. Tackled properly and negotiated carefully, children learn how to play successfully in the space. 'Making up stories' becomes improvisation. 'Pretending to be other people' is a performance. It can and should be liberating. Children instinctively understand performance and how to perform for an audience. I was at my friend's house and his daughter, barely two years old, finished a small bunch of grapes, plucking each one from the stalk and eating them. When she had finished eating, she held the empty stalk to the crown of her head, walked in front of us, and announced that she had a tree growing from her head, before collapsing in a fit of giggles. She had just written her first joke, sourced her first prop, negotiated her performance space and performed her material for us. This is, surely, drama.

By the time children get to school, subjects are more explicitly defined. It is critical that every student has a right to a creative education as part of their curriculum. This should ideally involve Art and Music and Dance, but I'm not here to fight their corners. Partly because I can't draw, sing or pirouette. Creativity, though, is vital to a child's educational, psychological and emotional development; the ability to think and work creatively is an extraordinarily valuable commodity and drama teaching and drama teachers deliver this in spades.

Let's take that a step further: drama is *vital*. A few years ago, I did some research work, involving drama and children who had (for one reason or another, and it was usually pretty heartbreaking) drifted

from mainstream education. This was ostensibly a project about using drama skills to try and help these students make sense of some of the things in their past. That's not a new or revolutionary idea; drama therapy has been recognized for several decades and can have genuinely transformative results, which clinicians recognize as valid. What the project sort of morphed into was helping to enable these students to find their voice, to stand up and to speak in front of other people. At first, I didn't understand. Partly due to my own ignorance. I'd never done any work like this. And to start with, these students wouldn't speak. Couldn't speak? No. They all had the capacity to speak. They would not speak.

I won't lie. It took absolutely ages, and for the longest time I wasn't sure I was getting anywhere. We carefully negotiated rules for speaking aloud, and sections of the shared space for speaking and sections for listening. We started by making sounds, collectively and with our eyes closed. Liberated by the lovely feeling of filling a space with a noise, we moved towards actual words. All of these children could speak, and slowly, we started to make progress as they each took terrifying steps towards looking other people in the eye and saying words out loud. Eventually, through gentle coaxing and constant reassurance, by establishing rules and boundaries and by making sure that this was a 'safe space' where no one would laugh at anyone for anything they'd attempted, the students started to speak. From my lofty and entirely misplaced middle-class notions of enriching these young people's lives through some (I thought) really interesting plays and drama games, I came to realize that these students simply didn't dare speak at home. Never mind me, waltzing confidently in with copies of poems and extracts from Dennis Kelly's *DNA*. These children did not dare speak, and often it was for fear of violence or recrimination. It was absolutely no wonder that they wouldn't open their mouths and communicate when it came to these

sessions. Once they started to speak, we could then work on them making eye contact, speaking and addressing someone, standing up and looking at someone as they spoke to them. And without fear or shame. I came to understand the vulnerability of these people and how much trust in us and belief in themselves it took to be able to stand up and take part. Let's be honest: these are only the first fledgling steps of contribution in any sort of drama activity. The project taught me that drama is indeed vital; it gives people a voice. Literally. The right to speak and to express and to declaim. Stripped back from notions about formal assessment or examination results or theatre-going, it is a communication tool. The more creativity that can be simultaneously harnessed, the better.

Then there's the very notion of creativity itself. What is creativity? It might be helpful if we all had a common and shared definition of the word. What does it mean to be creative? We all know what it means to be creative, surely. We recognize creativity when we see it. Sure we do. We can spot it in those we teach and those we know. 'She's really creative', you might be told, about someone who has a particular way with words. Or, 'I love what he's done with them, he's so creative', you might hear about someone else who has a knack with arranging pictures on a wall. Creativity appears in all walks of life and applies to us all. We are all creative, but to what degree? I'm labouring this point because the notion of creativity is bandied around a lot, as is the word itself. Its definition, though, in any real-life context, is much harder to pin down. If we know what creativity is, even if it means having different definitions or different interpretations of the word, how do we measure it? What is the unit for measuring creativity? Spoiler: there isn't one. Creativity is fundamentally at the heart of our subject, and the application or demonstration of creative ideas is mentioned in examination specifications at all levels, and yet: there is no measure for it. I can tell you how many kilometres the

Earth is from Jupiter (it's around 629 million, seeing as you asked) and how many people have been members of the Sugababes (six in total, but never more than three at the same time), but I cannot measure how creative any of my students are.

Try to see it as liberating, rather than restrictive or bewildering. As drama teachers we have to spot creativity in our students and know how to nurture it. We have to use creativity in our approaches to our classroom practice. And we have to find creative ideas and solutions to the work in front of us. Your creativity might be slightly different from my creativity, but I like to think of it as seeing a situation where someone has 'turned the lights on'. That moment where a spark happened, someone applied some logic, thought laterally, used some emotional intelligence. I'd struggle a bit with the notion that it's where 'magic happens'. Creativity isn't that. We are all of us creative, not sorcerers, and must learn how to recognize our strengths in using our own creativity as well as helping to spot it and nurture it in those in our charge. It's at the very epicentre of our subject, and whilst it's really hard to define and impossible to accurately 'measure', it needs to be the spark of the ignition of what we do as drama teachers.

Free from the shackles of adult inhibitions and social conditioning, children can be immensely creative. The genuine creativity and joy in play that can be seen in very young children tends to dissipate and get a bit lost as they get older. Older children are less and less likely to take risks. As teachers, in the British school system, locked into an assessment-overloaded curriculum, we increasingly teach to the test. And guess what? We ourselves are less likely to take risks. Therefore, in theory, it's possible that the older and 'wiser' we get, and the more experienced we are as drama teachers, the fewer risks we take. In so doing, we are closing off potential possibilities of genuine creativity. We might become stale. And we shouldn't be stale. Our students deserve brilliant drama teachers, not stale and stuck ones. If we want

our students to be creative, and that involves taking risks, then we are going to have to be willing to take risks and be creative too. By engendering creativity in our students, we can establish, enable and nurture creative urges and impulses that can last a lifetime.

A subject in permanent self-defence

At the time of writing, drama is on the decline. What does that mean? It means that, in basic terms, with every year that is passing, fewer and fewer students are opting to study the subject to any level of formal qualification (BTEC, GCSE, A level). It means that fewer schools are offering the subject, and that it's becoming the preserve of well-funded and selective independent and grammar schools. It means that the subject is being pushed out of options choices at GCSE, and that lower down the school, at Key Stage 3, it's falling off the agenda or – worst-case scenario but far from uncommon – some schools are doing away with it altogether. Despite all of the brilliant and unique things that our subject can bring to a young person, and to a school community, it's on the decline. Massive educational reforms in the last decade, driven by Ofqual and pushed through by a Minister of State for Education (you know who) who was obsessed with the notion of 'rigour' and his own crackpot ideological whims, have seen our subject be pushed into the margins or drop off the grid altogether. Let's be honest: this isn't good. Not at all. The fact is that if you're reading this and you're a drama teacher, the fight still goes on and that's a *very good thing*.

It wasn't always thus, and not so long ago either. I left school at the end of the last century/millennium (just typing that makes me feel a little bit queasy). I was born into Margaret Thatcher's Britain and had spent my entire childhood and teenage years being

educated by policies set out by the Conservative governments of their day. That National Curriculum? Fully up and running by the time I started junior school. My teachers, some of whom were then nearing retirement and, having been standing at the blackboard since the 1960s, were having absolutely none of it and just did their own thing. (One slightly batty junior school teacher taught us our times tables but called it 'ticker-tickering'. Obviously.) I left school within a week of Tony Blair's landslide New Labour victory and went about getting my A levels, taking a gap year (working as a waiter in a cocktail bar, travelling in South-east Asia and trying and failing to learn *Redemption Song* on the guitar) and going off to university. In the meantime, Blair's government, swept to power on a mantra of 'Education, education, education', set about broad educational reforms, which included the pioneering Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme. This recognized that some schools had been built to serve children and communities in the 1960s, or even earlier, and were woefully out of date. Not just in lacking a fancy reception area with comfortable chairs, but in being able to meet the needs of a curriculum which was being renewed to keep pace with the then burgeoning digital era. Money was promised, and that money was poured into the BSF; a huge investment into hundreds of thousands of lives and into making real and tangible changes to the educational model. When I took my first terrified and tentative steps back into the classroom as an unqualified teacher, in 2004, it was easy to see how these changes and reforms had come to impact on school communities and those who studied and worked in them.

My own secondary school had been a 1960s relic; all rubbish glazing, leaky roofs and about three photocopiers to the entire building. The school in which I found myself 'teaching' (I was unqualified, untested and woefully unprepared back then) was flash, modern, purpose-built. Another old 1960s relic has been bulldozed to make way for

this new BSF project which was complete with dance studios (with sprung floors!), a proper theatre space (with retractable seating!) and music recording studios and software (with the power to connect to the Internet!) to rival professionals. Education, education, education indeed. The school that I had landed in was in a seriously deprived area, about to be plunged into special measures, but built with serious optimism about the possibilities of drama and the other performing arts. The school had, in fact, been designated as a specialist performing arts college, thank you very much. I can remember that when I'd got my qualified teacher status and was applying for jobs, things looked different from my own 1960s relic school. I applied for a job at a school which was boasting a music studio that had been opened by the Bee Gees and a drama studio performance space that Tony and Cherie Blair had opened. How about that, eh?

I realize now that, of course, it's cyclical and that these things ebb and flow. That whoosh of money and faith and investment into the bricks and mortar of New Labour's British schools also coincided with a renewed global focus in TV talent shows. A generation of schoolchildren watched and learned. Whilst the shows in question might be somewhat dubious in the claims they made, these primetime Saturday night shows depicted graft and training. Singers, dancers, actors, performers all rehearsing and rehearsing over and over again to try and 'make it'. A bit like *Fame* meets *Opportunity Knocks*, it was absolutely no coincidence that these TV shows, selling dreams of fame and stardust to the nation, and a renewed governmental commitment to proper and purpose-built facilities came about at the same time. When I started my first (qualified) teaching job in a sixth form college in 2005, the entire Performing Arts department had around sixty students on roll. When I left that job just less than four years later there were over 500 students in the same department. This was part of a national picture, and this was the boom time, to clumsily borrow

an economics metaphor. How, then, did we go so quickly from boom to (not quite but nearly) bust, as a subject, and why is this the case?

Educational reforms will always be on the horizon and Michael Gove-like figures will always be lurking in the shadows, ready to try and ruin it for a few generations of students, without ever having taught a day in their lives. Our subject remains in permanent 'self-defence'. Why? Partly it's due to that lack of status afforded by not being included in the National Curriculum. The liberation and creativity that the lack of inclusion gives us, as subject teachers, can mean that we are permanently having to fight our corner and plead our case for inclusion. I've yet to work in an establishment where colleagues haven't (good-naturedly or otherwise) trotted out the same-old, same-old jokes about the subject. I've had to try to convince sceptical or dubious parents that the subject is brilliant and worthy of their child's precious option choice at GCSE or A level and that it can be transformative and that it's accepted by all universities and ... no, wait! Come back! So, if the subject can sometimes be threatened by punishing educational whims, reforms and policymakers keen to make a name for themselves, and can also be eyed with amusement or suspicion by parents and our own esteemed colleagues, what chance does it stand?

It stands absolutely every chance providing that we, its practitioners, are willing to stand up and argue its case and defend its inclusion on the school timetable at every possible opportunity. We must learn how to fight for our subject. There isn't a headteacher in the country that's going to go on record and say that they don't see the point in drama or that they think it's 'not a proper subject'. That's because headteachers are clever, kind and honest to a tee. All of them. Every single one. Actually, come to think of it, there may be just a handful out there who *say* that they love the subject – and realize that photos of a big school production can really jazz up the