

The role of the director in Australian actor training: An exploration of dialogic leadership as a pedagogical practice for Australian directors and acting teachers

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Abstract

Australian actor training owes much of its history to the Russians; Stanislavski, Chekhov and to those that adopted and adapted their methodologies over the past century; Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler, Uta Hagen and Lee Strasberg. During the 1970's the advent of devised theatre and more physically based theatre practices saw the work of Europeans; LeCoq, Copeau and Laban recognised as valuable actor training tools. While Australian actor training has been informed by a plethora of practitioners and theorists, the same cannot be said for those providing the training. The teachers of acting who populate Australian Academies and Universities do not enjoy the same variety of methodologies on which to draw. The paucity of research investigating the pedagogical practices of directors and acting teachers in educational settings signals an opportunity for further investigation. This article introduces dialogic leadership as a pedagogical tool for directors and acting teachers. *Directing through Dialogue* is the term I use to describe a methodological approach to training actors that challenges the traditional hierarchical, director-centred model and replaces it with an actor-centred, egalitarian model. *Directing through Dialogue* utilises coaching and feedback to facilitate growth and development in student actors.

Keywords

Director; Acting; Dialogic Leadership; Directing through Dialogue; Coaching; Feedback

Introduction

Drawing on an autoethnographic study of a rehearsal process with students completing their first year of actor training at The West Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), this article examines how dialogic leadership practices and coaching can impact student learning and efficacy. It offers an approach to directing and teaching

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acting that serves to go some way towards addressing the gap in research around pedagogical practices in the teaching of performing arts.

A crucial component of actor training is learning to work with directors, who also may be acting teachers and industry professionals. This is an important part of introducing acting students to what they are likely to encounter in the industry. However, very little has been written about the methods associated with directing. Richard Trousdell (1992) notes

For most of us, directing is an unmapped art or an academic discipline with almost no fixed landmarks. Unlike acting, where we have many theories and methods to guide us, directing offers few schools of thought about its nature, preparation, or technique. (p. 25)

As a director and acting teacher my interest in how to develop my artistic and pedagogical practice led me to investigate the patterns of communication that occur between a director and an actor. The complexities of this relationship warrant unpacking to understand the effect it has on the training actor.

What I had experienced and observed over many years of teaching and directing student actors was the high degree of dependency that they demonstrated in the workshop space and the rehearsal room. I identified the potential of the research arena to source additional ways of addressing dependency and to uncover what I, in my role as teacher and director, could do to lead students from dependency into a place where they had more agency.

Principally, as a director and a teacher of actors I am in a position of leadership. Rebecca Daniels (1996) asserts that the director is essentially a leader, “While the degree of emphasis differs, most theorists, educators, and practitioners consider leadership to be an integral part of the directing process, and the most often acknowledged quality of a good director is leadership ability” (p. 11). If this is the case, what leadership style could best serve the training of actors?

Dialogic leadership

Over a four-year period whilst directing and teaching student actors I trialled various leadership styles. I arrived at what Isaacs (1999a) explains as Dialogic leadership. This is a term he gives to a way of leading that “consistently uncovers, through conversation, the hidden creative potential in any situation” (p. 2). Dialogic leadership draws on several philosophical underpinnings that explore the nature of dialogue. Philosophers, Mikhail Bakhtin and Martin Buber have been influential in their conceptualisation of dialogue. For Bakhtin, dialogue is ontological, that is “a way of living life in openness to others who are different from oneself, of relating to people and ideas that remain separate and distinct from our own” (as cited in Shields, p. 65). In Bakhtin’s view language is “inherently dialogic and it is through multiple voices that we can learn to see ourselves through the utterances of others” (as cited in Raelin, 2013, p. 820).

The idea of multiple voices is one that resonates with teaching actors, whereby a group of students come together to bring their collective imaginations, intellects and experiences to the task of learning how to tell stories and create meaning for an audience. How the members of this class form views of each other and their role in it is determined largely by the utterances they make, not only verbal utterances but also the physical, non-verbal language that people use to communicate. How the teacher sets up the container for the learning to occur is paramount to how the utterances will be made. If the container is one where students feel they have value then the offers they make are embedded in a belief that they have agency, resulting in positive and creative decision making. Fundamentally, dialogue is about an orientation towards another, a desire to understand and be understood, whereby meaning is created from the tension that exists between different voices (Bakhtin, 1981).

Martin Buber (2002) saw life as an encounter and inherently relational, he suggests that “For the most part we do not listen to the address, or we break into it with chatter. But if the word comes to us and the answer proceeds from us then human life exists, though brokenly, in the world” (p. 110). He distinguishes an *I and thou* way of relating, where we “treat others as fellow subjects and dialogue partners” (Phillips, 2011, p. 29), from an *I and it* relationship where we “treat others as objects to be analysed or manipulated” (p. 29). Appreciating the wholeness of the *thou* and their inherent value was an axiom of Buber’s philosophy, “The I-Thou relation stresses the mutual and holistic existence of two entities. It is an encounter of equals, who recognise each other as such. It is a *dialogue*” (Morgan & Guilherme, 2012, p. 982). If the teacher-student relationship is viewed as I-Thou then there is the potential for a more egalitarian frame to identify each other as equals.

Taylor and Kent (2014) hold that participants in dialogue “feel obligated to design their communication interactions with other people to facilitate interaction, self-discovery, and co-creation of reality” (p. 389). The co-creation of reality is an exciting way of viewing actor training where the student learns how to develop the ability to collaborate with others in creating a reality that contains making work in relationship with others. Dialogue’s emphasis on “multivocality, open-endedness, human connection, and the co-creation of meaning” according to Laura Black (2008, p. 94), allows the participants to explore more fully the complexities of other peoples’ imaginations and perspectives as well as their own. This notion of exploration resonates with rehearsal practices. Discovering a character’s wants and needs and their relationships with other characters, whilst endeavouring to communicate as an ensemble, is part of the work for an actor and a cast.

Directing through dialogue

Dialogic leadership offered the possibility of what Poulos (2008) calls the “active praxis of imagination and courage” (p.119). The teacher establishes an environment through their leadership that invites students to have the courage to fully engage and bring their imaginative selves to the acting process. *Directing through dialogue* is the term I use to explain how Dialogic leadership can work for the acting teacher and director. It refers to a way of being in the rehearsal process that more broadly positions the

teacher/director as one who engages in a process of influence where power is shared and not invested predominantly with an individual, to one where multi voices are heard and given permission to influence and affect learning and teaching.

Coaching

Coaching is one approach I utilised to assist in creating the dialogic teaching space in an autoethnographic study that was conducted with a group of students completing their first year of actor training at WAAPA. My aim was to determine the impact of adopting a coaching approach to the direction of a play and to explore the degree to which the student actors felt they had agency in the rehearsal process.

Robert Benedetti (1985) suggests that all actors need to have a clear sense of the direction in which they are heading and that this can be achieved through regular feedback and coaching on their progress from the director. However, the word *coaching* can be defined in a myriad of ways. I will be drawing on understandings of coaching as developed by John Whitmore which were introduced in his seminal text, *Coaching for Performance* (2002). Whitmore (2002) advocates that coaching is a leadership behaviour at the other end of the continuum from command and control. Coaches aim to encourage the best performance out of the coachee. For this to happen the person being coached needs to be treated as an equal even if their role has a lesser label, for example, teacher and student, director and actor, stage manager and assistant stage manager.

The focus of coaching is to enhance performance and this is achieved, according to Wilson (2007), “through a dialogue which assists coachee’s to see new perspectives and achieve greater clarity about their own thoughts, emotions and actions, and about the people and situations around them” (p. 7). Enabling actors to open up the space within themselves in which “there is room to look around, see what is no longer required, what might be rearranged, and where there are gaps that could be filled” (Wilson 2007, p. 16) could afford them more agency in the creative process. If students are able to confidently draw upon their intuition, thoughts and creativity then the outcome for the development of their acting craft could be enhanced.

Researching a rehearsal process with first year acting students

I take you to the first day of rehearsals with nine first year student actors. They are embarking on their final project for the year where they will rehearse a play for four weeks which they will then perform for a public audience. They sit in a circle gazing at me with expectation and hope in their eyes. After a process of introduction, I ask if there are questions. One student, Margie looks at me and says, “I’d really like to know what your vision for the play is”. My inclination was to try and explain a vision, to make them feel inspired and excited, that they could sit back comfortably and relax because I had it all in hand. They could trust that I would wave my director’s wand and we would have an amazing production on our hands. However, ignoring my inclinations, I decide

to opt for a coaching approach instead, I say, “I have some ideas about the play, however I’m really keen to hear what your vision for the play is”. A look of terror flashes momentarily across her face. This wasn’t going to plan. I expected a look of joy that she would have agency and be able to have input into the play. I glance around the cast, who begin to shift slightly uncomfortably, how was this ever going to work?

Trusting the coaching process, we proceeded with rehearsals, me with more awareness and caution after the initial session and over the rehearsal period I witnessed the actors gradually beginning to trust themselves enough to bring their voices to the process. What I mean by bringing their voices to the process, is the student actors were making offers based on their own ideas and imagination rather than on the need to impress or garner my approval. It was often challenging for me to hold back and not immediately offer my view. In an interview with Margie two years later, I asked her about that question she had posed to me on the first day of rehearsals. She explained in her response, “I guess that was because it was the first time we had been given free reign after a year where we had been told exactly how it was to be done ... I think I grew a lot as an actor, doing it.” The payoff for Margie and the cast was that they were required to think about what the play meant for each of them and use their imagination to create a vision. Further, they knew that I was interested in their opinions, their thinking and their ideas. I trusted that their creative capacities were part of what they needed to bring to the rehearsal floor.

Whitmore (2002) suggests that we only express about 40% of our full potential (and this figure is probably a lot less) and the obstacle or reason that we aren’t able to reach our full human potential is fear. Fear of failure, fear of what other people think, fear of looking stupid. He says the “single, universal, internal block” to reaching our potential is a lack of self-belief (2002, p. 18). This was good to know. I was then in a position to think about how I could dissolve this block so that I could build self-belief in my students. Since judging yourself to be capable of success increases your chances of actual success, while judging yourself as not capable of success reduces your chances of actual success.

As part of my bid to build self-efficacy in the students I would often ask the actors for their thoughts on the work they had done, before sharing mine. This was to acknowledge that the power differential between director and actor, teacher and student, could influence what the acting student might offer. Rather than agreeing with me to get it ‘right’ I was much more curious to understand how they were seeing the character and situation and then look at it how it intersected with my own thinking.

An example of Directing through Dialogue is illustrated in this clip which shows an interaction between myself and one of the actors. We are working on a scene and I have asked him a question about the way his character is viewing the situation. I then leave space for him to process and articulate his thoughts.



Video: [Coaching in the Dialogic Space](#)

You will notice the silences and the pauses, the actor appears to be ill at ease and awkward some of the time. This is important, to allow the space for the actor to process all that is going on in the scene and in his thoughts and response. He initially says “Yes” and then changes his mind to “No”. This process enabled him to own the character more fully. It is vital with a coaching approach that the questions asked of the actor are not leading questions or questions that I already know the answer to, only asking to make the actor think they are coming up with the ideas themselves. One of the actors said, “I felt like whenever you posed a question it would be an actual open discussion about it and which way it could go, you wouldn’t like lead us onto a specific path that you’ve created yourself and you’re not telling us”.

Building self-belief or what Albert Bandura (1997) has termed self-efficacy, is key to understanding how coaching has the capacity to enhance pedagogical practices and student performance. For the director, building self-belief in actors requires letting go of the “need to control others or to maintain their belief in our superior abilities” (Whitmore, 2002, p. 18). Most importantly, self-belief is built when people are able to make decisions, feel their choices are valued and take responsibility for their success and failures. An advantage for the director using a coaching approach is that actors begin to draw on their own intuition and creativity to drive their work rather than waiting to be told what to do by a director, or worse still, making offers in order to elicit the director’s approval. One of the actors in a later interview recalled a director he had worked with who had a very fixed idea of how he wanted a character played. The actor described the impact it had on him during rehearsal, “And the question that kept going through my head was am I doing this right? Or the way he [the director] wants it done? Or the way he’s envisioned it.”

For an actor to be thinking “am I doing this right?” indicates that they are distracted from being in the world of the character, that they are not present for those performing with them and their attention is not ideally in a place that is going to serve the story

they are telling. In the dialogic space, there is a sense of the whole, a wholeness that develops through a shared sense of investment in the creation of the work.

Feedback and notes

The other area that formed an important part of the research was the use of feedback and notes with the aim of building self-efficacy and agency in the acting students. My goal in the feedback I gave the students during the rehearsal period was to facilitate their development as actors. To do this I identified when the story-telling was clear, acknowledged choices that were risky, and asked questions when the story telling lacked clarity for me as the outside eye. I deliberately scanned for positive aspects of the performance, rather than succumbing to a prevailing misconception that feedback is about the things that need fixing, wrapped up in the concept of “constructive criticism”. Constructive criticism in my view is death to creativity and damaging to actor development.

Director, Christine Young (2012, p. 137) notes that students “demonstrate a bias toward equating harsh criticism with a rigorous approach to training”. For some students, if they are not being criticised, they feel like they are not improving and developing. And for some teachers, they feel that to improve performance one must identify deficiencies. I challenged this idea of students and their acting being deficient by framing feedback in terms of what was working for a potential audience. For example, “your vocal attack on the lines in the scene with your Mother revealed the complexity of the relationship between the two of you. This was really effective”. This allows the student to understand specifically the impact of their choices on a viewer. In another example, “I’m not understanding how he feels about his illness – how can we make that clearer?”, it is not about the actor being good or bad, it’s information that the acting student can use. This information led to a discussion about the nature of the illness with the actor discovering how the character’s illness was affecting his cognitive and emotional functioning. One student said that the notes they received, “Encouraged deep creative thought” while another indicated that they “found notes very helpful, always finding the best from me”.

This approach enabled me to elicit more challenging choices without the notion of failure or success; right and wrong from the students. Framing feedback in terms of negative and positive, good and bad can create an environment where the actor feels like there is a right and wrong way of acting. This can inhibit creativity and narrow the depth of their contribution in rehearsal and making what acting teachers often refer to as “bold choices”, very difficult. As one cast member noted, “I found it fun to make mistakes” and another, “The collaborative nature of the process was fun as we got to make attempts or offers and it was not an issue if we failed”. By identifying strengths in their performance and asking questions of the actor, individuals can explore freely without fear of failure and experience a sense of ownership of their development which in turn, can help build self-belief. By reframing feedback to identify what was working, what was serving the story, and what areas needed different choices to tell the story more clearly, students felt that “It was a fun, safe and creative work environment” to work in.

Outcomes

The outcome of the rehearsal process with the first year acting students was determined from data gathered through questionnaires, completed by participants immediately after the completion of the performance and my own observations that I had made as the researcher/director, captured in journal entries. I also interviewed the students two years after the research period when the students were in 3rd year. The results demonstrated some reservations about the Directing through dialogue process. Some of the reservations were around students not feeling like they had the skills to contribute to the degree I was asking of them. As one actor said, “Sometimes I just wanted to be told how to say the line” and “I feel the director could have taken more control, directed the scene in the direction she wanted more and taken more of a stand over the actors.” This revealed the actor’s unfamiliarity with being given power and influence in the creative process, exacerbated to a degree by their inexperience. This also indicated that for some students the need to have someone telling them what to do was important and that they viewed part of the director’s role as needing to control.

Overwhelmingly, the students found the process challenging but all reported that the collaborative environment allowed them “permission to grow and develop”. This was an important discovery, with students believing that growth and development was part of the rehearsal process. The students felt empowered by the process, “We had a shared investment in the production” and “It was a fun process and extremely challenging”. The power of the dialogic space was highlighted by one of the students who noted, “And because when you have more than one person thinking on it obviously you are going to have more ideas come from that.” The value of the process was encapsulated by the comment, “It was always interesting and I was always learning”, indicating the pedagogical value of a coaching approach when directing actors. This clarified that a director’s role as a leader can encompass a structure that depends more on the contribution from multiple people and less on the chain of command prevalent in a hierarchical paradigm.

By embedding dialogic leadership practices in the education of Australian students, the pedagogical landscape of actor training has the means to shift. The educator moves from the position of judge and controller to one who establishes an environment that allows for openness and vulnerability. According to Brene Brown (2016), vulnerability is about showing up and being visible, something we are asking our students actors to do on a daily basis. She explains that it is taxing to do that when we’re terrified about what people might see or think. According to Brown (2013), “when we’re fuelled by the fear of what other people think or that gremlin that’s constantly whispering “You’re not good enough” in our ear, it’s tough to show up. We end up hustling for our worthiness rather than standing in it” (as cited in Schawbel, para 8). If students are able to dismiss that gremlin then the choices they see themselves as having, are expanded.

Brown (2016) describes a culture of scarcity that she believes is permeating our society. She purports that this culture of scarcity begins with Never _____ enough. Fill in the blank with good, pretty, funny, clever, smart. The impact of this, according to Brown is that people armour up, to keep themselves safe from ridicule and judgement.

However, this armour also prevents us from accessing vulnerability and vulnerability is the path to trust and creativity and innovation which are vital to actors. If as teachers and directors we can build self-belief in our students, firstly we are helping dissolve the block to reaching our potential, so that they can begin to believe that they are enough. That they can bring their selves to the rehearsal room or the studio and participate as dialogic partners in learning their craft. One student said, “If I believe I am enough I also have to believe that my scene partner is enough and that is empowering for both of us”.

Epilogue

Last year I was working with Jarryd, a student who was auditioning for a place in the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). He received a ‘call back’ and had decided to perform a movement piece as part of his audition. I had seen the movement piece earlier and had sincerely hoped he would not use it if he was called back. In my view, the piece didn’t serve to show his skills and abilities. The night before the audition he asked me if I would watch it again and give him some feedback. My worst nightmare. I watched in dismay – it hadn’t changed. I knew it was going to take hours to work on it. I took a deep breath, looked at the student and said, “I think you’ve done your very best with this – there’s nothing I can add”. He smiled, thanked me and walked confidently out of the room. In that pause, that moment of in breath, I had decided that he didn’t require copious notes on what he could do to improve the piece, what he needed was for someone to believe that he was enough. What this exchange illuminated for me was that as directors and teachers we can get stuck giving instruction, direction, notes and lots of suggestions to make things better but at the heart of performing at our best is self-belief. Needless to say, Jarryd is now studying at NIDA.

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