Creative Drama—An Aesthetic Experience

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“My purpose in providing art experience for others is to make it possible for each person to explore and learn to use his own aesthetic sense, not because the creation of products in art media is of tremendous importance in every life, but because my experience leads me to believe that the aesthetic sense is also the moral sense, and the sense of self—of being.”

The late Frances Wilson of the Museum of Modern Art, states clearly the basic reason for teaching any art to children, and for creative drama this statement rings particularly true. There is no intent or wish to produce actors, for developing acting skill is not important in many lives. But it is vitally important that the child should become more aware of life, see his physical surroundings with delight, develop empathy with other people and find more faith and confidence in himself. Developing the aesthetic sense through creative dramatics has these outcomes.

In exploring the aesthetic sense in creative drama, that is, in using sense perception and imagination in the production of dramatic forms, a child is freed to think more deeply, to become more integrated within himself, and to experience an absorption in life that is very rare. The child brings his whole concentrated thinking process to the task of acting on material, of molding it, of shaping it, and of making it more flexible and more expressive of his idea. In this dramatic activity, the material which the child is molding is himself, his own body, his own voice, his physical movements, his very breathing.

Actual changes in physical appearance have been noted in some children as a result of creative drama participation. Here is one teacher’s description of the change creative dramatics made in a sixth grade child in her class:

When Doris talked to people she usually stood hunched with her toes pointed inward, let her head drop forward, and swayed from side to side. She looked down instead of at the other children, spoke very indistinctly and constantly fidgeted. After only four sessions in a creative dramatics group her shoulders began to relax, and she stood more erect when speaking to people. Eventually she fidgeted less and less, and began to look at people as she spoke. At the end of the semester, after twelve creative drama sessions, she gave a social studies report during which she stood comfortably, looked at her audience and spoke very clearly. It is my belief that the creative dramatics class caused these changes in Doris’ behavior.

Is the aesthetic sense primarily imagination? Perhaps it is. Certainly imagination makes the process of life a creative one. Imagination is the source of all man’s achievements including such varying products as the Mona Lisa, American democracy, and the Taj Mahal. Civilization itself, its achievements and its failures, all have come from the imagination of man.

In every individual life, too, imagination is the creative element. Imagination, as the aesthetic sense, is the process in a child which allows growth in thinking to occur. In imagining, a child integrates his past experience with his present environ-
ment, including the people who are there, the physical surroundings, and the ideas which come to his mind so that new perceptions emerge. Imagination is the synthesizing agent which brings together past, present and hope for the future in such a way that the child changes his environment and himself. The imaginative process, brought to its culmination, always changes both outer circumstances and the inner person, simultaneously, and it is in this process that personal growth occurs. The child becomes more confident, more poised, more sure of himself, more accepting and more understanding of self. He thinks more freely and clearly, and often to a depth which is astonishing. In dramatic activities one sees a dual result of the aesthetic process, or the imagination:

1. the mind becomes free so that ideas run through it easily and flexibly

2. the body becomes free to move and expresses these ideas in a fluid ever-changing art form

Always the mind and the body interact with each other so that the whole being of the child is alert and alive in a living and constantly changing aesthetic process.

Very seldom does our society, or perhaps any society, offer a child or an adult an opportunity to be so alive, so that creative drama often seems unnatural, at first. In adult classes students have sometimes objected after the first class period, that the activity seemed spurious only to say at the end of the course, “It helped me to think deeply,” “It gave me a new philosophy.” “It made me seriously re-think my whole approach to teaching.”

As one observes the importance for human beings of this aesthetic experience in drama, one thing becomes increasingly clear. The medium, drama, cannot effectively be used for specific ends. It cannot be used even for the very high purpose of helping students to be more alive and to think more deeply. Like happiness, which is always elusive if approached directly, deeper thinking and more zest for life result as a byproduct of creative drama in which the teacher chooses materials — stories, poems, ideas, songs—which are important and appealing to her group and sets about developing the imagination and concentration through very clear and definite drama skills. These skills, large physical movement, pantomime, characterization and dialogue are gradually developed until children can play simple scenes, and finally more complicated stories with several scenes.

Developing concentration is very important in creative drama but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that concentration, too, is a byproduct of exploring the aesthetic sense. In observing children in the process of creating characterization, it is amazing to see the attention and concentration they bring to the process. Always there is interest, frequently there is eagerness and delight, and sometimes there is an absorption in the process that is breathtaking. In this delightful absorption the child is sure of himself, completely at ease, full of self confidence, convinced that he is a worthwhile person, full of good will toward his peers, self-respecting — motivated by an inner feeling of worth. For this moment he is completely in tune with himself, comfortable with other human beings, and productive in his environment.

One teacher’s description of a child completely absorbed in the dramatic process follows:
The children were playing a legend which told why some of Hawaii's trees have flowers. They were very much caught up in the playing, and had come almost to the end of the story where the sun princess floats down from the clouds to confer beautiful flowers upon those trees who have befriended an injured bird.

"Who would like to be the sun princess?" I asked only to be interrupted by a big boy who had until then seemed rough and almost harsh in his speech. "Can't we have a sun princess?" he urged, and simultaneously with my astonished "why, yes" he pushed a chair to a table, hastily climbed up and began the final scene of the story by riding a imaginary steed onto the "stage". With elegance and delicacy he awarded the deserving trees their flowers, and closed his speech with a unique touch of his own—"and beautiful flower petals make a carpet all over the ground." The strain of Grieg's "Morning" supported his final words while the flowering trees swayed for a moment in the breeze and enjoyed their elegance and beauty.

In the evaluation period immediately following, one of the other boys asked about his horse. "He was "Pegasus" was the reply and none of us was surprised that he had turned to Greek legendry for the winged horse of poetry to express his vivid idea.

Here was a boy usually blunt, even rough, interested mainly in baseball and football activating an aspect of himself which certainly was unknown to his teacher and probably to himself as well. And developing this more sensitive aspect of personality was accomplished freely and spontaneously, in a situation which not only gave him intense personal satisfaction, but also stature with his classmates.

But one must not assume that having a drama experience, or any art experience, will always produce this beautifully functioning person. Our culture frequently opposes natural human development and rewards conformity of action and thought so that unless the teacher holds firmly to a basic philosophy or purpose in handling the art media (dance, drama, painting, whatever it may be) children may simply re-arrange or intrench their conforming stereotyped behavior. However, if the child is helped to explore and use his aesthetic sense freely, supported by a teacher who helps him find and express his own uniqueness, he will value it, simultaneously believing in and developing more faith in himself, for the very process of creating is an act of belief, of faith. If drama skills are imposed, that is, if the child is told how to act, if he continually supresses his own feeling and thinking, if he develops his characterizations through copying some model, living or otherwise, if he moves in a stereotyped pattern, there can be no growth.

In order to grow, the child must find his own way of expressing himself. His expression must spring from his inner being in the process of feeling-understanding-thinking-moving. In this sequence feeling is the inner spring which releases the whole process.

Responsibility of Leader

Here then is the delicate responsibility of the creative dramatics leader—to use all possible skill to support the child in responding to his own feeling sincerely and directly, through the dramatic elements of movement and dialogue. With some children this happens very soon, with others there is a longer period before the response comes, but in no case should forcing be used. One honest sincere response results in more growth than a hundred copied forced movements.

Is it really possible to see the children in creative drama become more aware of life, view their surroundings with more delight, develop more empathy with others, and find more faith and confidence in themselves? Many teachers and parents believe that these outcomes are evident.

Almost two years ago after the distressing racial incidents in Birmingham one mother telephoned the leader of her child's creative drama class:

"Jack has always been thoughtless, but when he read the paper today he said, "Mother, I know how these people feel." "How do you know, Jack?" I said, "We've learned to be so many characters in creative dramatics that now I can tell how other people feel."

While it is highly unusual for a child so clearly to see and express the relationship between creative drama activities and his own understanding, it is a phenomenon that creative drama teachers have frequently noted. To become another character and to identify with his feelings is an enlarging process in any mind, and this happens daily in a creative dramatics class.

In a complex, competitive, and insecure world, in schools where in spite of our best efforts and most sincere hopes we often reflect these qualities, it is reassuring to have at hand a medium which simultaneously sensitizes and strengthens, which creates awareness of good and evil, but always with compassion, which allows growth instead of forcing children into conforming behavior, which, in short, develops the aesthetic sense, "the moral sense, and the sense of self—of being."