



University of Chester

This work has been submitted to ChesterRep – the University of Chester's
online research repository

<http://chesterrep.openrepository.com>

Author(s): Allan Owens

Title: Decisions

Date: 1996

Originally published in: Performance Practice

Example citation: Owens, A. (1996). Decisions. *Performance Practice*, 2, 37-43

Version of item: As published

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/11806>

Decisions'

'Decisions' is a process drama initially created to explore the concept of ethical decision making. It has subsequently been developed into a pretext used with groups of all ages. Pretext, in this context is defined as a well constructed scaffolding structure for drama, a text that allows groups to quickly engage in drama and then create their own quality drama and theatre within and from that structure.(1)

The project documented in this article ran in October 1996 and formed part of the 'Decade of Evangelism' mission run jointly by the Chester and Wakefield dioceses. It used the 'Decisions' pretext as a vehicle for the sharing of faith, in particular, Christian beliefs relating to forgiveness. In this sense it was didactic in intent, but also had specific interventionist aspirations in asking individuals to consider concepts of revenge on personal, national and international levels. Another central element was a consideration of the way we, as individuals, make personal decisions in our lives.

The project aimed to engage a very diverse range of individuals in a performance which grew out of non-patronising dialogue at an authentic level. For example, in one group there were adults who found it difficult to read and write, working alongside undergraduates, vicars and curates.

Each had to be able to participate intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually at their own level in a joint creative process. The pretext had to captivate, it could not presume passive participation and tolerance. If people did not enjoy the drama they would leave or start disrupting the work. This is the situation process drama practitioners often operate in and it has been well documented. For example:

"Drama and theatre are paradoxical...in order to liberate drama must captivate. It teaches by leading up the garden path." (2)

A second challenge was to try and take real risks and avoid glib responses to the social and political issues that would inevitably be raised. The sharing of Christian faith somehow had to be celebrated through a non-exclusive approach, without the shadows of banging tambourines falling across the work. The social purposes of the drama would be foregrounded from the outset. Current writing on performance acknowledges this tradition:

"Performance has also moved into political activity directly with disadvantaged communities, inspired in part by the U.S. and European tradition of political performance and in part by specific community-oriented reformers such as Stuart

Brisley, Joan Littlewood and Welfare State in England, Armand Gatti in France, and particularly Augusto Boal in Latin America. Here art merges with daily activity not for perceptual experimentation, as in body art or Cunningham's modern dance, but as a means of exploring social situations and of developing leadership and coping skills in the participants/audience...some theorists have suggested, social and political concerns have become central to performance in the 1990's." (3)

In terms of form, this pretext shares certain common characteristics with that of contemporary post-modern theatre practice :

1. The fragmentation and distribution of roles amongst the group.
2. A non-linear and discontinuous approach to plot.
3. The re-working of classic themes and texts.
4. A blurring of the distinction between actors and audience.
5. A double self-consciousness.
6. A constant shifting of perspective.

(4) Process drama has little use for the forms of parody, wit, satire and pastiche. Its tools are narrative and authentic dialogue, shaped and manipulated by the director of the process, often, though not exclusively, in role. In good practice attention is continually drawn to form but only in so far as it puts the participants/ spectators at ease. It is in this way that the play frame is legitimised. Any coded references relate to popular culture not to academic learning or knowledge of

an elitist cultural tradition and heritage.

The 'Decisions' pretext which follows is presented in grid form to clarify the structure of the performance and some of the reasoning and methodology behind this. (5)

Decisions			
Pretext			
Step	Reason	Convention	Emphasis
1 Arrange the chairs in a circle with one chair outside it. Place a black cloak in the centre with a copy of 'Hamlet' on it, and a sword next to that.	Engages interest and encourages speculation.	Defines space.	The sword should be a 'safety foil' if possible. The safety element needs stressing before the group enters.
2 We will be looking at the concept of ethical decision making and 'Hamlet'.	Clarifies the focus of the work.	Contract.	You do not need to know anything about ethical decisions or 'Hamlet'. As usual your ideas will be used to develop the drama over the next week.
3 Let us play a game with four words that will be important in our drama. Move around the circle and point at each person in turn asking them to remember either 'Reason' 'Passion' 'Tradition' or 'Religion'. Remove one chair from the circle. Call out one of the words. Swap places if it is your word. The person in the middle can then call another word. If you call 'Ethical Decision' you all move.	The constituent parts of an 'ethical decision' are reason, passion, tradition and religion. Playing a game lodges them in the mind of the class to return to later in the drama.	Games.	Ask all the 'reasons' then, 'passions', etc. to raise their hands before playing in case anyone had misheard you. Play yourself.
4 How should we set the courtroom out?	Give some ownership and control to the group.	Define space.	Use their ideas, combine them if necessary.
5 Will someone play the king? Practise the King's entrance.	This can be used later in the drama.	Prepared role re-enactment.	The King is all powerful. It is a quiet, observant role initially.
6 Director takes on role of Hamlet symbolised by the sword and cloak	To be able to challenge from within the drama as it progresses	Director in role.	
7 The rest of the group are to be travelling players. What would you be, given a choice as a player e.g. juggler. A minute to think then we will go round the circle and guess as you mime.	To begin to establish the perspective of the players choice.	Collective role mime.	Keep the guessing of mimes quick to avoid embarrassment.
8 Let us go back in time to when Hamlet was a small boy. How old? He used to love the travelling players and got up to all sorts of mischief when they visited the castle. Begin reminiscing about the tricks he got up to with you all those years ago. Do this in pairs.	This begins to establish the perspective of the players.	Role work in pairs.	Give an example 'Do you remember when he cut my tightrope in half?'. Keep the anecdotes flowing. You only have a few minutes.

9 Whilst the pair work is in progress, let the volunteer playing the king know that Hamlet suspects him of killing his father and is very upset as he has married his mother. In a while the players will show a play revealing this. Think how through body language this can be shown. Before the end of the play leave the room.	To prepare the role and give the volunteer a challenge in drama terms of finding appropriate body language and responding to tension in having to choose the 'right' moment to flee.	Prepared role.	Make sure this volunteer is clear about the role and context knowing that they do not have to worry about instigating action at all.
10 Share reminiscences	Builds context.	Discussion.	Join in with reminiscences and remember to say you remember also. Ask questions to support anecdotes.
11 Draw a role of young Hamlet on the wall. Ask for adjectives to describe him. Move forward in time, Hamlet is now older. Draw another role on the wall and ask the group to watch you in the role as Hamlet. When you finish, ask for words that describe Hamlet now.	Focus on Hamlet's character and dilemma.	Role on the wall.	Upgrade all suggestions. If instead of offering adjectives, reasons for the change are given, remind the group you only want words at this point but that their ideas will come in useful later.
12 Group watches as director mimes the uncertainty in Hamlet's mind. Action with the sword suggests various feelings. Get someone to read the 'To be or not to be' speech.	Gives the group the chance to read action. Introduces the big change in his character.	Director in role. Mime. Soundtrack.	Ask the group to 'read' your actions. Use the King as a focus. They can watch and/or listen to the words.
13 Write down adjectives.	Focuses observations and tests understanding.	Role on the wall.	Focus on the words that describe action not the reasons for it.
14 The players arrive. Hamlet asks them to perform a play to 'catch the conscience of the King'. He rehearses the murder of Gonzago.	Allows the group to be successful very quickly in mounting a performance.	Whole group role play. Director in role.	Stress the friendship, trust and loyalty between you and the players in role.
15 Run the play for the King. In role, encourage the group to watch the King. Put on music as a backdrop for the Play.	Adds another layer of tension to the drama and high level of performance success.	Director in role. Whole group role play. Prepared role. Performance.	Urge everyone to 'read' the King for signs of guilt.
16 Remind the King to flee when he feels tension is right.	Gives the volunteer playing the King a chance to clarify action.	Prepared role.	Ask the King not to leave the room totally, as he needs to listen in.
17 Re-enact the play. Stop the music when the King Flees.	Adds Tension.	Re-enactment of performance and role play.	Ask did they see guilt.
18 Drop into narrative commentary. 'Hamlet said farewell to the players and went to kill the king. Just before he got to his room all the indecision fell upon him again'.	Focuses the dramatic action.	Narrative.	Do not let the players feel uncomfortable. Narrate them away from the action.
19 Bring the group back into a circle. What can Hamlet do now? What are the options?	Reintroduces ethical decision making.	Reflection on action.	Clarify the concrete opinions he now has.

20 Ask the group to choose either Reason, Passion, Tradition or Religion and argue these within Hamlet's mind.	Begins to illuminate what the constituent parts of an ethical decision are.	Mind parts.	Ask the group if they remember the words they played in the game with earlier in the drama.
21 Stand in the middle of the four groups. When you point your sword at a group, they must convince you from the perspective of their chosen word, what to do.	Deepens Commitment.	Director in role. Mind Parts.	Stress the arguments can be repeated. The aim is to convince.
22 Each person now has a chance to influence and decide what decision Hamlet makes in this play.	Allows individuals to reflect upon their attitude to revenge.	Conscience alley/corridor.	These do not have to be your personal beliefs or attitudes.
23 Agree upon symbolic actions that represent the various options for Hamlet.	To keep the emphasis on the decision not on the melodramatics of the situation.	In role models possible action.	Keep the options clear and distinct. The narrative after the decision cannot be prejudged.
24 'What happened in Shakespeare's play?' 'What ethical decisions have you made in your lives?'	To focus either on text or personal and social development.	Discussion.	Explain why you made the particular decision you did.

Step twenty one and twenty four in this pretext were specifically shaped for the 'Decade of Evangelism' context. In other words a specific subtext was made explicit. In step twenty one there were always Christian performers located in the 'religion' group. This enabled the leader to challenge these individuals beliefs strongly in front of the rest of the group. This was not rehearsed and the challenge was authentic.

Step twenty four moved directly into a Parallel situation where the whole group were asked to listen to a pre-recorded tape. This was three minutes long and was recorded for this Particular project by a student whose cousin was murdered by her own boyfriend in 1995. It chronicled the hate she had felt for the *murderer, the way it had destroyed* and is still destroying their family life.

It also made the point that the only relief she found from the pain and anger was through a newly found faith. Prior to this event she had never been in the least religious. As the tape was played a picture of the murdered woman was passed around the group.

Following this, everyone was asked, "Do you feel that you could forgive someone who had murdered someone close to you?" The group were asked to place themselves physically along a line which represented a continuum from, "Yes" at one end to, "No" at the other. It was then the director's job to facilitate discussion across the complete spectrum of responses to this question.

In order to bring the scale of the *decision closer to everyday events* and to pull away from murder as one

of the 'ultimate' decisions, the group were then asked to choose a decision they expected to make in the future or had done in the past. In groups they were asked to present a tableaux of each person's or just one moment of 'decision' and include a caption. The session finished in a sharing of these decisions through a performance of images, some of which were activated.

This pretext operated from the philosophical standpoint that the world is, to a degree, 'knowable'. This is not to deny that there are as many individual constructs of the world as there are individuals but that there are certain universal and absolute truths and qualities that over-arch these constructs which all people have a sense of e.g. good, evil, hate, love, care, honesty, happiness, sadness. On one level this implies a rejection of post-modernism characterised by its belief in the conditionality of everything, including its own thinking. Process drama practice is often characterised by a certainty that there are certain 'sensed' universals, absolutes and objective truths. This does not imply that all of or any of the answers are known but rather that there are key questions which should be asked. The spirit of this approach is suggested in the response St. Augustine made when asked to define time: "You ask me what time is ... I Know, but when you ask me I don't know."

Evaluations of this performance project were through responses to a written questionnaire completed during or shortly after the work was completed. Given the stressed Christian element in the project, comments often related to perceptions about Christians e.g. "I've found out that not all Christians are nutters" / " I could perhaps forgive, but it would take a long time"/ "I think Christians try and brain-wash you "/ " You've got to think through things in life before they happen to you"/ "I never think things through that is just how it is"/ I wish I could make decisions without worrying about other people."

Research is continuing from this project. Attitudes, values and beliefs of the participants (both leaders and group members) were recorded prior to, and immediately after, the performance. They will be monitored and recorded again after one month and three months in an attempt to ascertain what participants remember about the performance and how, if at all, this has subsequently informed the way they make decisions. Psychologists interested in this area have suggested that art itself is a search for equilibrium, a way of knowing. The use of the 'Decisions' pretext in this project was an attempt to share the varied attitudes, values and beliefs of a specific group of individuals as they focused on 'imaginary' and 'real' critical instances of behaviour. Art is an "...indispensable discharge of

nervous energy and a complex method of finding an equilibrium between our organism and the environment in critical instances of our behaviour". (6)

1. Owens, A. & Barber, K. DramaWorks, Caryl Press, 1996. Cecily O'Neil coined this term and has written extensively about it e.g. O'Neil, C. Drama Worlds Heinemann U.S.A, 1995.
2. O'Toole, J. National Drama. N.D. Drama (Pub), 1992.
3. Carlson, M. Performance-a critical introduction, Routledge, 1996.
4. O'Neil, C. Drama Worlds, Heinemann USA, 1995.
5. Owens, A. & Barber, K. DramaWorks, Caryl Press, 1996.
6. Vygotsky, L.S. The Psychology of Art 1971 p.259. Quoted in Art as a Mode of Knowing: Louise Townsend, SCYPT Journal Summer, 1996 No 32 p.27.

Allan Owens