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## Living through extremes in process drama

by Ádám Bethlenfalvy, Budapest, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary/L'Harmattan Publishing, 2020, 279 pp., Paperback, ISBN 978-2-343-20662-2

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Living through extremes in process drama**, by Ádám Bethlenfalvy, Budapest, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary/L'Harmattan Publishing, 2020, 279 pp., Paperback, ISBN 978-2-343-20662-2

This book represents an important new contribution to the theory and practise of the applied drama and theatre field. It is the result of the Hungarian researcher, drama practitioner and artist: Ádám Bethlenfalvy's doctoral study, centring on the concept of 'living through drama' in the process drama tradition associated with pioneers like Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, Cecily O'Neill, and David Davis – and its connections to the theatre forms of the playwright Edward Bond. The book also offers an inspiring admission into to the author's own practise and reflections on challenges and priorities in contemporary drama education. It has a theoretical rather than a methods approach, and provides both food for reflection and for discussion.

The book is based on two fundamental elements in Bethlenfalvy's research: So-called Living Through Drama attributed to early Heathcotian Drama in Education (DIE) and a Bondian approach to Theatre in Education (TIE). The intention of the study is to explore possibilities of 'incorporating Bond's theory and practise into drama lessons based on a living through approach' (Bethlenfalvy 2020, 16). The main research question is: 'can Bondian Drama Events be created in Living Through Drama?' (155). Although a leading question, suggesting an expected affirmative result, the study takes the reader through a complex and interesting reflection process based on both philosophical and empirical evidence, which contributes to enriching the field's self-understanding and praxis.

The book starts with a foreword by David Davis (2014), who usefully contextualises the focus of the study in a historical and contemporary perspective. An introduction by Bethlenfalvy, formulates the motivation and the purpose of the study. It is presented in six chapters and seven appendices (the latter mainly data references and interviews). Regrettably, there is no index, which would have enabled a better cross-referencing of terms, many of which are rather idiosyncratic and not easily accessible to readers not familiar with Heathcotian, and particularly Bondian philosophy and terminology.

The first two chapters defines central concepts like Living Through Drama (LTD) and Drama Event (DE). The first term is capitalised to make it stand out from general conceptions of improvised, experiential role-play, and denotes a more existential, engrossing experience within an improvised drama structure: 'where participants are in role and experiencing and dealing with some sort of *crisis* [my italics] within the fictional situation' (Bethlenfalvy 2020, 22). The second term is capitalised to denote a central Bondian concept that offers a focus at a pivotal dramatic moment: 'It is the dramatic expression of the clash produced within the self between our human need for justice and the elements of the culture we live in that become ingrained in our selves' (13, 87). Both concepts have in common a focus on engaging participants in drama that is not just playful acting-out but concerned with critical meaning-making or questioning dominant social narratives in society. This has to do with the nature of the crisis faced in the drama, and the manner of being in the dramatic fiction. Chapter one also presents a review (and criticism) of different approaches to DIE, and chapter two discusses underlying dramaturgical structures, as well as central concepts and devices used in Bond's theory and practise. Chapter three exemplifies a drama lesson on child abuse devised by David Davis, supplemented with fine analytical comments by Chris Cooper. It discusses how central structures

and concepts in LTD and selected Bondian approaches can bring together an artistic and an educational praxis. Chapter four and five comprise the framework, methodology, data collection methods and data analysis. The research methodology is action research within a reflective practitioner paradigm (152), and data collection tools are well-known approaches like interviews, questionnaires, observations, reflective diary and documents created by participants – the latter an interesting apropos to the use of objects in Bond (166). The research plan and the ensuing data analysis appear lucid, structured, ethically anchored, and self-critical, imparting an impression of research competence and honesty. The study offers a useful model of empirical research in the field, and in the final chapter Bethlenfalvy offers reflections on some further uses of his action research findings for contemporary drama in education, focussing new relationships between LTD/process drama and theatre (238).


Where I am at odds with Bethlenfalvy is his rather categorical dismissal of other approaches in process drama that may have a similar potential of breaking internalised social attitudes and can connect to social situations familiar to the participants, like Boal's theatre of the oppressed, Brecht's learning-play model, or Neeland's and Goode's conventions-approach. To be sure, Bethlenfalvy's important project is to investigate how aspects of Bond's theatre praxis can enrich and renew DIE, which I do find important and inspiring. However, in our field literature – and in Bethlenfalvy's own references – there are several mentions of for example Brechtian influence in analyses of both Heathcote's, Neeland's and Goode's, and Bond's work. None of these are discussed as potential resources but either ignored or rejected as valuable properties in drama education. The view that Brechtian 'distancing' is in essence rational and cognitive (73), and working against 'engaging with dominant social narratives from within the story' (20), seems to me based on presumption and bias rather than proper investigation. In terms of writing style, too sparse use of commas impedes at times reading rhythm and comprehension, and the layout of headlines and captions is a little confusing. I appreciate the use of full author names in the literature list. It improves accuracy and information about the sources.

I find the latter part of the book best. Here, Bethlenfalvy offers fine summaries and clear accentuations related to both the research project as such, to recommendations for change of practises in the field, and to his own theory and practise as researcher, teacher, and artist. His emphasis on artistic ambition and competence in the educational field is very important and recommendable. It may take a while for readers to find one's bearings in the first part of this text. But once the basic concepts and premises of the selected theoretical and practical perspectives are in place, the text becomes more and more engaging. The Bond concepts offer a new and useful framework for analysis and planning of process drama structures. Even though the book emphasises theoretical perspectives, due to its origin as a doctoral study, it should be read by both drama researchers, drama students, and drama teachers.

## Reference

Davis, David. 2014. *Imagining the Real. Towards a New Theory of Drama in Education*. London: IOE Press/Trentham Books.

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