

Living Through Extremes in Process Drama by Ádám Bethlenfalvy

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Reviewed by Chris Cooper

This is a very useful, challenging and to my mind, timely book; a refreshing change from drama cookbooks packed with recipes.

As I write, a victorious Taliban are in control of Afghanistan once more, after a catastrophic 20 year, UK backed, US 'war on terror' designed (publicly at least) to defeat them. My emotions swing somewhere between rage, despair, shame, and disgust and when I listen to Tory government ministers, feelings of all four at once. The emergency debate (if it could be called that) in Parliament was as delusional as it was poverty stricken. There was talk of 'Global Britain' acting independently without the Americans (where have they been for the last fifty years?) when the reality is Post-Brexit Britain is alone and without friends and needs its armed forces to deliver food to supermarkets. No one even bothered to mention the fact that the UK had already withdrawn its troops from Helmand province in 2014. I have heard the betrayal of Afghanistan described as the greatest foreign policy disaster since Suez. This of course is self-serving nonsense. You only have to look at Iraq, amongst many other places, to recognise that. But as Charlotte Lydia Riley so eloquently put it:

Invoking Suez is not really about learning new lessons. Rather, it is about signalling a particular idea of what it means to be British in the world, and constructing a history of British foreign policy in which the nation has made one, single mistake, which no event since has ever beaten in disaster or ignominy. It's a comforting fiction."

(The Guardian, 4 September, 2021)

We live in extreme times, described sometimes as a post-truth age, in which comforting fiction abounds. The fiction of English exceptionalism is fed by delusional narratives like the one about Suez. This is what Bond has identified as Site A, our epoch. It's hard to make sense of it all. How do we find centre ourselves in this chaos? In Ádám Bethlenfalvy's book, extremes and the narratives we construct, or are ideologically constructed for us, to negotiate our way through this crisis are central concerns for drama praxis. It's about drama for living. *Living through Extremes in Process Drama*, based on his PhD research, is about exploring the connection between 'living through drama' and Edward Bond's approach to theatre or, as Bond refers to the work that he is doing, 'drama'.

Bethlenfalvy began this particular journey following the work he did with Big Brum TIE and having engaged with the work of Professor David Davis. Davis was the supervisor for his PhD and provides a very useful foreword to the book to frame the reader. I ought, perhaps, to declare an interest here. I was Bethlenfalvy's director during his time at Big Brum, and he is both a longstanding and close colleague and friend. This

probably disqualifies me as a useful and impartial reviewer. But I'll leave it to the reader to decide.

In his introduction, Bethlenfalvy candidly notes that his own teaching, built on stale dramaturgy and a limited use of drama conventions had brought him to a turning point.

I began to suspect that my lessons lacked depth, they seemed quite mechanical" (p15).

Who hasn't been there? Encountering the work of Edward Bond through Big Brum proved to be a formative experience and set him on the path towards his PhD. Bethlenfalvy set out to explore

...if Drama Events can be created in Living Through Drama. This would mean that participants of drama lessons would create gaps in meaning that challenge dominant social narratives on their own from within the improvisations in the fiction.

The question is vast, and he isn't able – by his own admission - to comprehensively answer it in this publication. But there is a lot to learn from this exploration of Lived Through Drama (LTD), Bondian theory and the documented practice of his teaching. There are no simple recipes here, but the book clearly identifies connections between LTD and Bond and possibilities for new action research which, I believe, is necessary if we are to create participatory drama that penetrates ideological narratives and explores the relationship between self and society.

Chapter One is titled *Living Through Drama*. Bethlenfalvy provides an very useful historical context and clarification of terms for the reader.

As drama lessons based on a variety of approaches to drama in education can include living through improvisations it is useful to differentiate between living through drama and Living Through Drama with capital letters. The latter focuses on creating improvisation where participants are in role and experiencing and dealing with some sort of crisis within the fictional situation. (p22)

This latter interpretation is his area of interest. Here, Bethlenfalvy outlines the origins of the form, and Heathcote's 'man in a mess' approach; presenting participants with a crisis (what they are living through), stepping into the fiction by building belief and developing the self-spectator which according to Bolton is

...a conception that enactment leads to seeing oneself in the fiction one is making." (p32)

Bethlenfalvy then describes the key features of three interpretations of LTD by Gavin Bolton, Cecily O'Neill and David Davis. The latter is critical to the book because while Bolton and O'Neill create awareness of the art form in participants, Davis also emphasises learning about theatre as well as part of his process. Like Bolton, Davis strives for metaxis, seeing from two worlds simultaneously by being both in the drama and outside at the same time. But crucially, Bethlenfalvy notes, that Davis wants to use metaxis to

...involve us in such a way that we meet ourselves giving us the possibility of reworking the ideology that has entered us: the possibility of glimpsing how society has corrupted us. (p52)

This, of course, is the critical dimension that Bethlenfalvy seeks to embed from Bondian drama into his drama teaching which Davis acknowledges in his foreword to be “entirely new.”

The rest of the chapter surveys critiques of LTD outlining connections with Bondian dramaturgy and Drama Events (DEs). Of fundamental importance is not only how to use drama to create gaps in dominant social narratives in order to understand our world (Site A) but for participants to do that from within the story or specific situations (what Bond calls Site B). Bethlenfalvy’s survey of LTD concludes that his research drama lessons could be based on three areas: a) Qualities of narratives b) Aspects of structuring c) Understanding created (see pages 67-68). It’s worth underlining again here, I think, that Bethlenfalvy is aiming for metaxis rather than self-spectatorship, understanding from within the (story) drama rather than from outside.

Chapter Two is dedicated to exploring: *What is a Drama Event*. This is a clear and comprehensive explanation and analysis of DEs beginning with Bethlenfalvy’s own experience as an actor in Big Brum’s production of *The Under Room* in 2005 (The 5th play commissioned from Bond by the Company). Where it gets most interesting, in my opinion, is where he broadens the scope of the book out from the section on ‘Confusing reality and Fiction – Ideology’. He quotes Bond referring to the gap between cause and effect.

The gap referred to by Bond above is a central element in his theory. The gap between cause and effect in this case, or between matter and its value, or action and its meaning are filled up through the use of imagination, and the meaning or the value of reality is actually created in the mind of the individual as it structures these interpretations into an image of the world. Bond explains that “we can know the objective world only through our subjective presence in, and awareness of, the objective world. It’s as if there were two realities: the objective reality and the subjective, conscious, reality”, this latter one is the understanding of the objective reality in the mind. This subjective reality is constantly re-created as individuals experience events and Bond also links it to the formation of the self ...” (p75)

This leads on to a fascinating section on the self and what Bond calls Radical Innocence. Bethlenfalvy introduces us to the thinking of Adorno, Horkeimer, and Althusser, Daniel N Stern and Damasio, and Amoiropoulis and Roper. As Bethlenfalvy acknowledges, Amoiropoulis and Roper, along with Davis and Katiafiaz benefited enormously from having the *practice* of Big Brum working with Bond to develop their thinking around over a number of years. Bethlenfalvy’s research, and his book, is shaped by the same spirit of openly sharing his own practice, and despite the complexity of the drama theory, avoids esoteric and obscure academic speak. When he presents his explanation of the “human paradox”, I think we are at the core of the book in terms of how we can realise a dramatic practice that liberates seeing from ideologized spectacles.

“Bond sees the self as a “palimpsest of maps” that is built on the need to be at home in the world, the radical innocence, but contains the layers of understanding of the world where culturally determined values mix with those based on personal values. ... Bond conceptualises this

conflict within the self as the “human paradox”. “The paradox is the sudden, dramatic assertion of radical innocence when it is confronted by a conflict between itself and social teaching, which social teaching cannot reconcile or conjure away”, states Bond. Responding to these unresolvable conflicts are acts of creating the self, according to Bond, as the responder creates her stance in relation to the questions arising from the conflict. He states that drama’s subject is “society in people”.

It is the Drama Event that creates this gap and the audience (or participant in process drama etc.) must use the imagination to resolve the conflict.

Bond is very specific in his definition of what needs to happen on stage to make this possible, he developed a set of concepts that can be used in the artistic process. I discuss these in detail in the following chapter. The central concept of my research, the Drama Event is linked strongly to the human paradox discussed above. 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.” (p86)

Having outlined the ontology underpinning DEs, the chapter develops understanding a DE within the context of its metonymical structures and the concept of cathexis (p98 and 99) which is critical to realising the power of objects in Bondian drama and to his own teaching practice. Bethlenfalvy offers useful examples from Bond’s plays too, like the DE in *Coffee* discussed by Davis (p100) and in *A Window* (p103) discussed by Amouropolis, before turning to a detailed and highly illuminating analysis of the DEs using the brick in *The Children* (p111). In the chapter summary he categorises the Bondian devices that are present in the creation of DEs: Centre, Enactment, Cathexis, Site and Gap.

Chapter Three is ‘*Bringing together the Artistic and Educational Praxis*’. Critical to this is Davis’ characterisation in his own book, *Imagining the Real*, of the relationship between metaxis and DE through what he calls “understanding from within the stream”. Bethlenfalvy then assesses what is needed to structure a “Bondian LTD”.

For this to be possible in fictional situations the classroom drama needs to be planned in a way that provides four different functions.

- a) It needs to be engaging enough for the group so that they are motivated to enter it and be involved in the making of it.
- b) The meta-text of the situation needs to contain elements or expressions of dominant cultural narratives that can surface and be reflected on from within the story.
- c) The fiction needs to have a powerful angle of connection with the participants’ actual social context so that the metaxis function steps into operation.
- d) An awareness of the central dilemmas and the aim of creating gaps for other participants and those watching... (p131)

This leads him to identify structures used in both Bondian and LTD drama to develop his own classroom action research.

In Bondian drama the key elements are Story – the ‘Framework of fiction’, Site – the ‘Framework of Connecting Different Spheres’, ‘Situation’ (everything is situated in time and space) and ‘Extremes Encountered – Comparison of the Crises Engaged’.

In LTD he focuses on - Sequencing, Internal Coherence, Focus and Pre-text.

Finally, our attention to the concept of the Centre.

I think that using the concept of the Centre can be very useful for developing classroom dramas as it incorporates the principal organising points referred to above but in some aspects, it offers more than focus and pre-text do and plays an important role in creating Des. (p142)

In my own view that ‘something more’ lies in the holistic and flexible (rather than fixed) and very practical tool the concept of the Centre provides practitioners. Bond once remarked to me in an email that ‘everything comes through the Centre’ and over the years I have come to realise that this really is true, and it extends beyond the central speech and lines that he identified in his original thinking, to central images, actions, objects and even sounds. This provides a very useful tool for rehearsals of a play or indeed, structuring drama lessons.

In what is a very insightful short section of the book, Bethlenfalvy then connects the Layers of Meaning (Heathcote’s Levels of Explanation in an action) to ‘Enacting the Invisible Object...’

Bond uses the phrase ‘acting the Invisible Object’ referring to someone from within the drama showing the situation without its ideological interpretations. Davis explains that “the invisible object can be misleading as a term. It does not necessarily relate to an object but to the objective situation – what is objectively there rather than what is perceived in ideology”. The term is profoundly rooted in Bond’s theory, explained in detail in the second chapter, which says that we use a culturally formed toolkit for interpreting situation and what we perceive as reality is actually deeply informed by the cultural narratives that we use as reference points in the process of interpretation. Acting the Invisible Object refers to showing that there is a human situation that is covered by ideological interpretations. (p144)

He then cites an example used by Amoiropolous from *A Window* to demonstrate the difference between interpreting actions through the Layers of Meaning approach and Enacting the Invisible Object.

From the perspective of Bond’s theory the four layers of meaning behind the action can be seen as different interpretive narratives that are present in our culture. So, for example, to the model level question of where an action was learned from people could give a response that is based on their usual cultural understanding of such situation, this would simply reinforce their viewpoint rather than question it. To bring an example from my own praxis, in a drama lesson engaging with a

situation of bullying I asked participants to make a depiction of the model level for the bully's action, to show where he learnt what he was doing, and in most cases they brought back situations of bullying at home, in which the bully was a victim. I believe that this a narrative ingrained in our culture that is widely used to explain why someone becomes a bully. In this case this narrative was reinforced rather than questioned. It is possible that I did not structure or facilitate the task well enough, nevertheless it still shows the problem with the structure. The case would be very similar on a psychological level of motivation or the philosophical level of life-view.

Adapting this structure to a Bondian approach would mean that these interpretive narratives that are part of our usual cultural understanding need to be identified so that they can be shown as artificial interpretations of the situation. The linearity of these narratives of interpretation needs to be ruptured in the DE. Showing them would enhance that a gap is opened to create another, a 'real', a human interpretation of the situation. The wide scope of my research has not allowed me to develop this specific idea further practically, it remains an exciting territory to explore in the future. (p146)

I share his excitement here about future possible territory for exploration, especially when I think about the dominant narratives of the current 'culture war', itself a misleading term, consciously deployed I believe, to obscure what it really is, class war.

Chapter Four outlines the *Research Methodology* and Chapter Five, *Data Analysis*. I am well beyond my ZPD here, but I can appreciate that the research design offers a useful model for praxis (p159) and more importantly the data analysis allows for a substantial and detailed sharing of Bethlenfalvy's drama lessons. I would direct the reader to the Narratives section in the Second Cycle of teaching of the *Wild Child* lessons (*Wild Child* is based on the story of a feral child, Oxana Malaya, from the Ukraine), which gives an interesting insight into how the participants negotiated their interpretations of the narrative from a philosophical, values-based point of view, within the constraints of their roles as members of the NGO. This resonates strongly with what is written earlier about metaxis and "understanding from within the stream."

In a key moment, Bethlenfalvy describes his approach to structuring the next series, as part of the 'Second Cycle', of *Wild Child* lessons by creating a prologue making conscious use of the Centre as a tool.

I shared the Centre that the drama was aiming to investigate explicitly so participants could use it as a reference point through the lesson. ... With *Wild Child* I also made the research of this theatre approach part of the prologue, so I was asking them to investigate with me the inclusion of Bondian structures and concepts into the drama lesson, framing them as co-researchers exploring the implementation of this specific theatre theory and practice. (p215)

This proves to be somewhat of a breakthrough in moving his teaching closer towards creating DEs in the drama lessons described here. The descriptions of the

improvisations as part of the *Wild Child* drama (pp220-221 and p223) are extremely useful. The book records the reflections of participants on their experience and the thoughts of one is quoted, some 4 months after the event.

I have quite intense memories of the situation – it was perhaps the first improvisation of my life. The strongest feeling was the excitement. I got engulfed in the excitement of the situation, of finding out something special and new in the examination of Wanda [the Wild child]. I also remember the uncertainty that I realised in the middle of the scene that I don't know how I should behave in such a situation. We had planned the scene with M. (for example that I will be recording my comments on the side) – but what does a researcher comment? What is significant and what isn't? The importance of things change when you have a human living like an animal. The classic stories like Mowgli and Tarzan are useless here, this is an issue that creates a hole in human thinking – when the borders of the categories we know shift we freeze, we feel uncomfortable, and don't know what to do. (p221)

The paradox between allowing herself to be engulfed by the moment (being in the situation) and the realisation that she (her self) didn't know how to behave in that situation indicates the kind of metaxis that Bethlenfalvy is seeking which perhaps opens the door to creating DEs. Furthermore, he goes on to reflect that:

Altogether, the participants' reflections and the analysis of the activity of participants in the drama lessons shows that offering drama concept and structures and a frame does not hinder the improvisation, it adds an awareness of the artistic dimensions of the living through experiences of participants in the drama lessons. It is also visible that participants are able to incorporate structures offered in scenes they create and a more delicate break-up of tasks, an appropriate rationing of responsibility placed on participants could make it possible for participants to include them in improvisations as well.“ (p223)

All of which served to deepen the improvisational work of the participants in the *Wild Child* drama. It also seems quite apparent that their consciousness of the Centre and the form of theatre (and therefore its function) led to very interesting reflections on society, and the dominant narratives at work in any given situation. Bethlenfalvy notes that *Wild Child* did not build on any specific social concern but it did reflect many different aspects of social life. As another participant remarks:

'It was interesting that we had a lot of ethical questions coming up at different points. The main question was: what is good for her and what does society expect? So, I think this was a constant question, are we doing something that's good for her, or is it because of the expectations of society.'

The question in this form connects powerfully to one of Bolton's three long- term aims in drama, that Davis argues is disappearing from drama in education: 'to help the student know how and when (and when not) to adapt to the world he lives in'. The classic trope of the feral child

carries the duality that gives space to work on these questions in specific situations.“ (p225)

Given the situation, the existential crisis, the species is in, helping young to know “how and when (and when not) to adapt” to this world, to question dominant narratives is crucial. It seems to me that the familiar trope of the feral child offers the particular through which to explore the universal (or what Bond calls the relationship between the kitchen table and the edge of the universe), the fundamental questions of what it is to be human are opened up.

The findings from the two cycles of dramas are succinctly summarised on pages 228-229 and Bethlenfalvy finishes by outlining future possibilities for research in Chapter Six. There is plenty here for the reader to pick up on and develop in their own practice, but there is one thing that strikes me perhaps above all, and it relates to the *Wild Child* lessons. The *Wild Child* drama, like the moments described from Bond’s *The Children*, *A Window* and *Coffee* are extreme.

In his plays, Bond pushes moments in the drama to extremes. That’s because in real life when we enter extreme moments – usually moments of crisis - we must find out who we are. All our prejudices, our mindless assumptions, and the ideological veil before our eyes falls away, and we meet ourselves. Bond seeks to use this strategy (part of the tragic tradition) to create this freedom in the drama to meet ourselves on the stage. It provides an opportunity to separate the real out from under the ideological veil.

The extreme does not have to be violent it can be comic. But it enables us to see beyond convention in a new or different way. Fairy tales use the extreme all the time to engage self-creativity, for example, the abandoning of children in *Hansel and Gretel*. We often underestimate the distancing power of fiction itself – that children know (and enjoy) it’s a story/not real. In Bondian drama the extremes are built into the site and the situation. Bethlenfalvy demonstrates this by providing a very useful example of this using the (cathexed) brick in *The Children* referred to earlier.

In *The Children*, bricks appear throughout the play. There is a stoning of a doll. Joe, the protagonist in the play, tries to smash his own doll with a brick in frustration because he feels trapped. Later a Man, appears. He kills other children by smashing their skulls in with a brick. He too is trapped, by grief, and is taking revenge for the death of his own child. This structural element running through the play, helps the audience follow something in the play, not through a role but the object. At one point we see the Man kill a child with a brick. But the extremity comes not from the killing but from the way he talks about his love for his own child as he cradles the brick like a baby beforehand. The Man suddenly becomes very human, just before he kills. This extremity forces us to completely re-think what we have been thinking (or judging) up to this point.

I asked Bethlenfalvy about the extreme in his research in a recorded conversation, and he stated that:

I found what I learned about the ‘extreme’ really interesting, which I have a sense of from working in theatre. But as a drama teacher I was quite

cautious about it, and for the same reasons as for example the teachers observing my lesson with nine/ten year olds who were thinking 'is that alright?' In The Children drama lesson a mother asks her child to burn down the house. As a parent that's really extreme and disturbing. The kids in the drama lesson, they were [in role as] friends with this child – I was playing the child who was asked to burn the house down by the mother. But they thought that was really exciting, because – and they very explicitly said – you know, unless there is a real problem it will be boring. And what I also realised was that having this extreme problem made them very aware that it is fictional, and it's not real life. So, they said if it had been real life that would be too much, but in a story it's okay, because we need exciting things. And they also pointed out that it's really different for an adult looking at it from outside than from the perspective of a child participating in it. So they said 'ah, we can imagine the teacher thinks it's too much, but actually it was great fun for us because we had something to deal with'. So, I found it really interesting how, for example, extremes in a story can reinforce its fictional nature for children, like in fairy tales for example.... You have dragons and giants and all sorts of horrible, terrible things. I mean, if they existed in real life that would be a real problem. And we do have them in real life, but in different forms. But to understand how they work you need to engage with them in fiction.

So, the extreme can not only penetrate ideology, but it can protect us too; if I know it's fiction, then I can decide how much I want to feel a child's situation prompting the "ethical questions" referred to. It is a very clear indication of what makes the most powerful stories and situations for engaging young minds.

There is undoubtedly more learning to be gleaned from this book than the above. It is full of thought-provoking and challenging thinking for any drama teacher who may be feeling like their lessons have become mechanical. The appendices containing interviews with Mike Fleming, Cecily O'Neill and Edward Bond add substantial meat to some of the core concerns of the book for example. But as an artist and teacher struggling to make sense of this complex and crisis ridden world, trying not to become numb with rage at the suffering of Afghan people today, or the ecological breakdown tomorrow, and trying to orientate my practice so that I can drive into the crisis of these extreme times, I know we need new narratives and new approaches to drama to help us know ourselves and society. Ádám Bethlenfalvy has made an important contribution to learning how to do that.