



Groundbreaking and Ingenious Teaching Methods for Teaching of Drama in the Context of Iranian Universities

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Abstract

The study of drama is one of the most interesting, thought-provoking, and pleasing experiences in the field of English literature, but it seems there are some reasons why it may not look like to be so for some of the students of drama in the context of Iranian universities. It seems, first of all, there are some plays which appear baffling when students read them for the first time; secondly, some of expert university teachers follow their fixed sanctified method of drama teaching when they encounter so dissimilar plays. This paper explores innovative and resourceful teaching methods for teaching of drama in the context of Iranian universities. The purpose of this paper is to provide drama teachers with ideas and suggestions for responding to any classic, modern, and postmodern plays that they might encounter as part of the course at university. The present research paper gains significance as the findings may shed more light on groundbreaking and ingenious teaching methods for teaching of drama in the context of Iranian universities.

Keywords: Drama, Drama Teaching, Ancient Greek Drama, Medieval Drama, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama, Modern and Postmodern Drama

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Introduction

The influences of English “in the construction and distribution of academic knowledge are very complex” (Kuhi, 2013, p. 118). Most teachers of English Language and Literature agree on some basic aims for their students. They think that their students, through their experiences in reading of literary texts, will develop an appreciation for literature in general and will attain social understanding and ripeness in particular. However, drama, as an invaluable means for reaching these goals, receives little emphasis in the total English program in the departments of English Language and Literature. As teachers of English drama in the context of Iranian universities, we felt responsibility for supervisory of university students through one of the most cardinal courses of their studying, English drama. Teachers of English drama in our country spend a lot of time to prepare semester plan and to teach students of English drama in accordance with the curriculum of the discipline. However, as teachers of English drama, we are not always preoccupied with finding the new and creative teaching methods for teaching of drama in our classes. Although all plays have certain features in common, they are different from each other in one or another way. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to explore innovative and resourceful teaching methods for teaching of drama in the context of Iranian universities.

The present research paper gains significance as the findings may shed more light on groundbreaking and ingenious teaching methods for teaching of drama. It may help teachers of drama develop their skills by offering practical advice about how to study drama and how to teach it. The study of drama is one of the most fascinating and pleasing experiences in English literature, but apparently there are some ins and outs why it might not look like to be so for some of the students. At the outset, there are some plays, which appear perplexing when students read them, for the first time. Furthermore, some of expert teachers try to follow their fixed sacred method of drama teaching when they come across so diverse and confusing plays.

Discussion

What Is Drama?

“Drama” as a term comes from a Greek word which means “action”. It is the oldest and the earliest term of imitative arts. Its starting point is vague in history; however, it may lay in the religious nature of mankind. The ancient Greek drama originated from the religious festivities of the people in the name of Dionysus, god of wine, good health, and fun:

One of the greatest contributions of the Ancient Greeks to Western culture was their invention of drama and the theater. . . . Like most Greek rituals these dramas were part of religious festivals. . . . The plays were usually a lesson in public education and dealt with issues important to Greek people - power, justice, morality, war, and peace, and man’s relationship with gods, family, and the city-state (Breyer, 1996, p. 92).

Mimes were performed and later on dialogues were added to it. The themes and characters were supernatural. The two masks, the laughing face and the weeping face, linked with drama depict the traditional generic distinction between comedy and tragedy. “Ancient Greek comedies are descended from fertility rituals that dramatized the joy of renewal, the joy of triumphing over obstacles, the joy of being (in a sense) reborn” (Barnet, Burto & Cain, 2008, p. 1220). Sounding very Aristotelian, David Mamet (as cited in Herren, 2016, p. 36) has written that the:

purpose of theater, like magic, like religion . . . is to inspire cleansing awe . . . tragedy is cleansing because it confronts us with . . . our humanity, with our capacity for evil . . . Tragedy is about horrific things. It is about bringing the hidden to light so that one can grieve. And that’s why tragedy, in the perfect form, is cleansing, because it enables us to deal with repression . . . And as Freud would have said, instead of living a happy life, be more capable to live a life of ordinary misery.

In English the term “play” is used to describe drama. “Although a play usually tells a story as Ezra Pound observed ‘is not words, but persons moving about on a stage using words’ (Barnet, Berman, & Burto, 1993, p. 3). It is a representational form of art, “a visible and audible narrative presenting virtual, fictional characters within a virtual, fictional universe ... being an art of performance, must be experienced - seen - in order to be appreciated fully” (Galens & Hamilton, 2010, p. vii).

The Nature of Drama and a Natural Teaching Method

The students who read a play alone at home or library will not find out the nuances of the play’s language, structure, and events without classroom reading and performing of the play on one hand, and studying critical reviews about the play on the other hand. It is said that the most distinctive indispensable nature of drama is having actors who stage a story for the audience to see, therefore, teachers should use classroom stage for play reading; it can produce an appropriate atmosphere for play reading because it puts the play reader where she or he belongs, on a stage apart from the other students who play the role of the audience. Performing plays in class not only involves students and helps get them motivated about reading of plays but also causes them to participate in drama activity which encourages students and teachers to:

- gain an understanding of real world events from the past and the present, the individuals who shaped these events, and the individuals who may influence them in the future;

- develop reading comprehension skills by entering the world of a text through role playing, interacting with others, visualizing events, concepts, and information, and dramatizing the experiences of fictional characters and real-life individuals;

- discover and scrutinize ethical aspects of social issues such as equity, social justice, citizenship, civil rights, bigotry, bullying, and other forms of antisocial behavior and their reversals from various points of view;
- understand and develop compassion for others’ representations of ideas, values, beliefs, experiences, and life conditions –from literary characters and challenged individuals to historical figures);
- acquire critical thinking skills in terms of examining, questioning, and perhaps challenging social practices and the language, actions, and beliefs that drive these practices, and investigating and evaluating texts concerning their manner of representing certain people, groups, and notions of reality;
- gain social skills through ... listening to differing views, respecting, weighing, and perhaps acting on another’s proposals, and expressing empathy and compassion (Dowdy & Kaplan, 2011, p. 7).

The Ever-Changing Currents of Cultural Issues & Teaching of Drama

Students should discover how a play represented the cultural themes at the time of its first performance and how the ever-changing currents of cultural issues have gone through its interpretation and impact on readers and audience of the performance of the play in theater. And to do this, students should know a little about the culture of the time which created the play and the playwright who wrote it. Teachers of drama should supply this material in convenient, creative methods for the student of dramatic texts. Agnes Cardinal (1995) stated that:

Such is the popular residue of a period in European cultural history during which radical departures in German theater influence drama worldwide. Earlier in the century, Naturalism and Expressionism had introduced audiences to subject matter and modes of expression previously considered unsuitable for the stage. Politics . . . and the role of women had become standard themes in European drama by the time Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Toller and Erwin Piscator began to revolutionise dramaturgy on the Berlin stage of the 1920s. (p. 65)

Ancient Greek Drama and Some Suggestions for Teaching It

The history of European drama began at the festivals of Dionysus in ancient Athens, where tragedy, satyr-drama and comedy were performed:

Ancient Greek drama comprises three principal genres: tragedy, satyrdrama and comedy. These resemble each other in many ways, and were performed at the same festivals, but each had its own distinguishing features, which are so clear-cut that when a new papyrus fragment of a hitherto unknown dramatic text is discovered it is nearly always possible to assign it to its correct genre on the basis of language, meter and content. (Sommerstein, 2002, p.1)

Understanding this background is vital for students of Greek drama, therefore teachers of Greek drama should do their best to explore innovative and resourceful teaching methods for teaching of this background. Alan H. Sommerstein's *Greek Drama and Dramatists* can be a very good introduction about Greek drama. Sommerstein begins by looking at the social and theatrical contexts and different characteristics of the three genres of ancient Greek drama. Teachers of Greek drama should do the same; using video files about the social and theatrical contexts and different characteristics of the three genres of ancient Greek drama, they should give students very good background knowledge about ancient Greek drama. It will be a baffling experience, for the students, to study Greek drama without this background knowledge. Giving short synopses of an extant play, teachers of Greek drama can introduce each of the five main dramatists of Greek drama whose works survive - Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and Menander and discuss these dramatist's different styles, techniques, and ideas.

According to Barnet, Berman, and Burto (1993), a play is written to "be seen and to be heard. We go to *see* a play in a theater . . . but in the theater we also *hear* it" (p. 3), therefore, the reading of some parts of the ancient Greek plays is not enough. Teachers and students of ancient Greek plays must perform the play in the class to fully appreciate it, at least some part of the play, especially the parts in which chorus describe and comment upon the main action of a play with song, dance, and recitation. The experience of performing a play in the class is very different from reading it in class. In fact, the performance of art has great therapeutic value: it enhances and uplifts the morale of the audience and, therefore, it exerts a healing power over them (Ramazani, 2016, p. 127-28).

The Legacy of ancient Rome is considered the typical introduction to the accomplishments of the Roman world. Although the impact of Roman literature, art, politics, law, and language on western civilization is so deep and vast, for example in literature, in the works of William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Keats, and William Wordsworth, among others, unfortunately, only the works of two tragedians survive, Seneca and an unknown dramatist. Roman playwrights tried to follow the tradition of Greek drama and make it more cultured than before. "The legacy of classical drama to our world can be difficult to distinguish from the very idea of drama itself.... Similar claims might be made for Roman drama" (Jenkyns, 1992, p. 243).

Understanding the historical background is vital not only for students of Roman Senecan tragedies, but also for the students of Shakespearian Roman plays such as *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Titus Andronicus*. Teachers of Senecan tragedies should do their best to explore new and creative teaching methods for teaching of this historical background. Timothy J. Moore's *Roman Theatre* (2012) gives a very proper introduction to Roman theatrical traditions, including the origins of Roman theatre, the extant plays of Plautus, Terence and Seneca, and the many works of comedy, tragedy, mime and pantomime that no longer survive as written texts. As for Greek drama, performing of a Roman

tragedy in the class by the students is vital for appreciating Roman Senecan tragedies.

Medieval Drama and Some Suggestions for Teaching It

The mystery plays and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries are very different from Greek classical drama and modern drama. These plays depicted extracts from the Bible, communicated religious creed, and heartened their audiences to have Christian lives. Ordinary people performed them in public places:

In some larger cities in England these vernacular religious performances were performed and produced by guilds. . . . From this connection to the guilds they gained the name mystery play or just mysteries, from Latin *misterium* (occupation) rather than any biblical or spiritual mystery. Mystery plays should not be confused with Miracle plays, which re-enacted from the lives of the saints. . . . The use of cycles of mystery plays on festival days was widespread by the late 15th century. . . . During the 16th century morality plays often dealt with secular topics, including forms of knowledge, government, education, and civil conflict. (Browne & Kreiser, 2009, p. 173)

Leonard Goldstein in *The Origin of Medieval Drama* (2004) boldly argues that the 10th century church created play results from the fast integration of feudalism. Christians experienced the contradiction between the Church that offered salvation in the holy bread and wine and the Church that through its increasingly large holdings of property in land exploited large numbers of people. The subsequent decrease of faith led the church to try to revitalize it, promising salvation, and the termination of the agonies of this life. The trope was enacted as a play, expressing in the announcement of the Resurrection the promise of the Kingdom of Christ. Having at least a brief knowledge about Bible and understanding the historical background of the mystery plays and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries are vital for students of medieval drama in the context of Iranian universities in the departments of English Language and Literature.

Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama edited by Richard K. Emmerson (1990) offers help for new teachers of these works, encourages experienced teachers to rethink classroom presentation of familiar plays, and suggests new ways for all teachers to integrate medieval drama into undergraduate courses. In the second part of the book, "Approaches", seventeen essays present a rich collection of planning for teaching medieval English drama, from the liturgical texts of the 10th century to the morality plays and cycle plays of the 15th century. Several writers emphasize specific classroom strategies; some writers discuss staging and performance of the plays and others apply methodologies informed by theoretic approaches such as feminism, semiotics, and anthropology.

Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama and Some Suggestions for Teaching Them

One of the greatest pinnacles of drama in England was the drama of the 16th and 17th centuries. In addition to the Bard, William Shakespeare, such playwrights as Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Middleton, and Ben Jonson were noticeable dramatists during this period. Dramatists of this period drew some of their storylines from Greek mythology, Roman mythology, the plays of eminent Roman playwrights such as Plautus and Terence, and historical plays celebrated the lives of past kings, enhancing the image of the Tudor monarchy. Therefore the Iranian students of these dramatists in general, and the students of Shakespearian drama in particular, with no classical and no Christian background should be provided with the frame of reference necessary for understanding and appreciation of plays written by them. Martin Wiggins's *Shakespeare and the Drama of His Time* (2000) provided students and teachers with significant aspects of Shakespeare criticism and scholarship. He stated that William Shakespeare lived and worked during an amazing quarter-century in the history of English drama, which saw the growth of new kinds of tragedy and comedy, and the birth of the entirely new genre of tragicomedy. *Shakespeare and the Drama of His Time* describes the principal audience fashions, artistic conventions, and professional circumstances which defined, and enabled, his plays and those of his colleagues.

William Shakespeare's Drama and Some Suggestions for Teaching It

William Shakespeare is considered by so many drama teachers to be the greatest dramatist of all time. English dramatist, Ben Jonson, proclaimed that Shakespeare "was not of an age, but for all time" (as cited in Grazia, 2001, p. 265). Reading Shakespeare's plays will be amazing through some preparations. Here are some suggestions teachers can give students of Shakespeare's plays:

- a. Read a brief plot summary of the play before reading of the whole play. It will help you to have a better understanding about the play. Most editions of the plays have a brief plot summary of the play printed on the back cover.
- b. Read annotated plays rather than non-annotated ones. Reading annotated plays are more proper than non-annotated ones. Through the Annotated Shakespeare series, published by Yale University press, students have access to what they need to help them comprehend the plays of Shakespeare better. Judith McGowan, writing about Annotated Shakespeare series states that:

[Included are] introductory essays and on-page annotations that aid the reader in vocabulary, usage of Elizabethan English, pronunciation, alternative readings of phrases and lines, and prosody, i.e. metric structure or accents . . . Especially helpful are definitions of common words that have changed meanings over

the past four hundred years. (Books from 'The Annotated Shakespeare')

- c. Appreciate Shakespeare's special use of English grammar. You should know Shakespeare manipulates parts of speech for the sake of rhyme and meter, for example, he uses nouns and adjectives as verbs. In the opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet* Benvolio, referring to Romeo's apparent emotional distress say "So early walking did I see your son Towards him I made, but he was aware of me And stole into the covert of the wood (1.1.120-122). Links to websites that will help you understand Shakespeare's language. For example: Shakespeare's Language - <http://www.bardweb.net/language.html>-, and Pronunciation - <http://www.renfaire.com/Language/pronunciation.html>
- d. Read and reread carefully and take notes as you read. Each time you read a dialogue you will get a better understanding of it. Discuss the play with the other students.
- e. Perform scenes or read the play out loud in the class. They will give you insight that you would have missed in an individual reading at home. Drama is a representational form of art "a visible and audible narrative presenting virtual, fictional characters within a virtual, fictional universe . . . being an art of performance, must be experienced—seen—in order to be appreciated fully" (Galens & Hamilton, 2010, p. ix).
- f. Watch a performance of the play, a movie adaptation of the play, or listen to audio recordings of the play. But students should not forget that modern performance of the play or film adaptation might be shown in a different setting than the original play. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* is a proper source for students in this case. It is a collection of critical and historical essays on the films adapted from, and inspired by, Shakespeare's plays. "Films made from Shakespeare's plays exist at a meeting-point between conflicting assumptions, rival theories and practices of performance, and - at the most basic level - the uneasy and overlapping systems of theatre and cinema" (Jackson, 2007, p. 8).

Modern and Postmodern Drama & Some Suggestions for Teaching It

Unlike the earlier Greek classical drama or Shakespeare's plays, modern and postmodern plays do not focus on kings and heroes; they concentrate on ordinary people dealing with difficult issues in their lives. They express reactions to fast social change and catastrophic events like World War I; they often deal with the sense of alienation and loneliness that people feel in their lives. J. L. Styan's (1981) three-volume study, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* is a history of the whole modern drama written from this point of view that to understand Modern drama properly they should be performed. Styan's three-volume study identifies main movements of the age including realism, naturalism, symbolism, surrealism,

expressionism, and epic theater. In the preface common to each volume Styan states that “the subject of the study is . . . the bearing of theory on practice, and practice on theory . . . my hope is to provide another aid toward a properly stage-centered dramatic criticism, using performance equally with theory as the basis for a history of the stage” (p. xii).

Stephen Watt (1998) in *Postmodern/drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage* argues that “within considerations of the postmodern and postmodernity the drama is relegated to the status of the right-hand, or unmarked, term in dyadic constructions” (p. 6), thus, this absence demands a renewed exploration of drama’s relationships with latest economical, political, and cultural issues. Watt states that playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Cherrié Moraga, Harold Pinter, David Rabe, Karen Finley, and others should not be labeled “postmodernist,” but rather recognized as producers of texts that might be termed “post-modern.” Watt states that reading contemporary drama in such a fashion means reading culture more broadly. “As the simulation of reality and notions of posthumanist subjectivity have emerged as near obsessions both in indictments of contemporary American culture and in critical debate over postmodernism, they have occupied a similar space in David Rabe’s plays” (p. 166). Therefore the Iranian students of these dramatists should be provided with references, such as commentary on postmodernity by Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, necessary for understanding and appreciation of these kinds of plays.

Eric Bentley (1957) in the “Foreword” of *The Playwright as a Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times* state that:

The nature of modern drama . . . is comprehensible only to those who can see the sharp difference between modern and earlier cultures. . . . Until the modern period great drama has possessed not only those deeper and subtler qualities which reveal themselves to the careful analyst and which constitute its greatness, it has also possessed more generally available qualities. It has appealed on different levels. It has appealed to the connoisseur and the amateur, the critic and the public. It has functioned as mere entertainment for some and as the highest art for others. A great deal of modern art, however, including drama, does not possess this double appeal. It appeals only to those who can discern high art, just as modern entertainment frequently appeals only to those who are satisfied with mere entertainment. (p. xv)

Reading modern and postmodern drama will be delightful through some ways and means. Here are some suggestions by Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto in *Types of Drama: Plays and Essays* (1985). If students develop these suggestions into practices, they will get far more out of modern and postmodern plays:

1. Pay attention to the list of the characters, and carefully read whatever descriptions the playwright has provided. Early dramatists, such as Shakespeare, did not provide much in the way of description . . . but later [modern] playwrights are often very forthcoming.
2. Pay attention to gestures and costumes that are specified in the stage directions implied by the dialogues.
3. Keep in mind the kind of theater for which the play was written.
4. If the playwright describes the locale and the furnishings, try to envision the set clearly. Pay attention also to lighting. . . . Here the lighting . . . is also a part of the language of the dramatist.
5. Pay attention to whatever sound effects are specified in the play.
6. Pay attention, at least on second reading, to silences, including pauses within speeches or between speeches. (pp. 9-10)

Conclusion

University teachers of drama in the context of Iranian universities should abandon their fixed sanctified method of drama teaching when they encounter so many dissimilar plays. Classic, modern, and postmodern plays are different from each other; therefore, they need innovative and creative teaching methods for teaching them. They should use groundbreaking and ingenious teaching methods to make the study of drama as one of the most thought-provoking and pleasing experiences in the field of English literature such as involving students in play reading and play performing in classroom stage, using innovative and resourceful methods for giving historical background in which the plays have been written, using video files about the social and theatrical contexts and different characteristics of the genres of drama, applying methodologies informed by theoretic approaches such as feminism, semiotics, and anthropology, providing Christian background necessary for understanding and appreciation of plays written in Medieval drama and Elizabethan–Jacobean drama, and exploration of drama’s relationships with latest economic, political, and cultural issues.

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