

Finding Ourselves in Community: Class Plays in Family Settings

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Catherine Read

Mission Viejo, California

We have performed a school play for an audience of friends each year of home schooling – kindergarten through third grade. Each year but one the plays have brought us together with another family for practice and performance. These plays have been our major experience with community in home schooling and each play has been a privilege for our family to take part in.

Why should we perform school plays when we have school at home with just our family? And what is the importance of community in homeschooling? The answers to these two questions are interrelated and seeking the answers has greatly deepened my experience as a teacher using the Waldorf curriculum and as a member of a, in some ways, less than obvious community. Before going into these questions in detail, I will briefly describe the plays and experiences we have had in the last four years.

The Plays

When our older daughter, Claire, was in kindergarten (age 5/6) we performed “Cinderella” at the end of the year. A friend and her son were also in the play and they came to our school a few days to practice the play. The night of the performance the two families had dinner together with a third family, also friends with young children. Afterwards we gathered on our deck in the spring evening light. The audience sat on one side of the deck and the play was at the other side. The only prop was a potted lime tree where Cinderella talked to the birds in the tree over her mother’s grave. I wore a gold silk scarf gown and narrated the story. Claire was

Cinderella, the boy was the prince, his mother the stepmother, and my second daughter (who was 3 at the time) was a bird. Their costumes were silk capes. As I narrated the story, the children performed the actions. There were no spoken lines. The 3-year-old had, in all the rehearsals “flown” in and helped Cinderella pick the peas out of the cinders – but in the actual performance she was too shy to fly in. So, the birds were there in imagination only. When we finished our first school play, I felt for the first time how the performance is a gift to the audience and how their deep and active listening is a gift to the performers. The play emerges out of these two activities, and my experience of this deep connection between the audience and the performers has only intensified since that first play. My daughter was so proud after the play, she seemed to have come into her age overnight. This experience, too, has been repeated in subsequent years.



Would that I
had a child white as
snow red as blood
and black as the
wood of the
window frame.



First Grade Play, Little Snow White. “And when she was seven, she was as beautiful as the day.”

In the first grade we joined with a different family who were having kindergarten at home for two boys. We began working on this play six weeks before the performance. I wanted to use a play that had been written for kindergarten or first grade by Elizabeth Moore-Haas which told the story of Little Snow-White in song and verse. The first step was to plan; the two families met at a hiking trail in the Santa Ana mountains and walked to grove of dark green live oaks with a stream running through it. It was early spring, misty gray and cool. My husband took all the children to play in the creek while the two mothers worked on the script. Somehow the peace and

quiet and mystery of that place stayed with the play from beginning to end. We began by incorporating the songs into our circles separately at home. We also told the story and worked with it in school. My older daughter, Claire was Snow-White, the boy was the prince, the younger siblings were dwarves. I was the narrator, the hunter, and a dwarf, the other mother was the evil stepmother and a dwarf. We had several school days together in which the main lesson time consisted of play practice. My daughter made a main lesson book of the play in which she wrote her lines and drew to illustrate them. I had just taught her the lower case, so she got to use it in this book; what a special book. The story lived so deeply in Claire that the pictures are very expressive.

My husband covered our large blackboard with a scene of a castle and forest to be the backdrop for the play. He also helped back stage with costume changes and line prompting. The other mother made red pointed felt hats for the dwarves and a green triangular hat for the hunter. I wore the same golden silk gown and the stepmother wore a green dress because her heart was green with envy. Snow-White had a beautiful embroidered white dress and the prince wore a blue cape and gold crown. I narrated the beginning while Snow-White and the stepmother acted out the parts; this time they had particular lines to speak, quoted from Grimm's. Then we went into the song and verse part of the story where the dwarves sang and marched and they and the witch spoke to Snow-White. When it came to the performance, the younger boy was too shy so the dwarves were one less, and the prince's mother spoke his lines for him. The play went perfectly, and the audience of mothers and children received it warmly. Afterwards, in private, I said to Claire that she was wonderful Snow-White – she just glowed. In every little seven-year-old girl there lives someone who is “as beautiful as the day”.

We could have done this play with everything spoken or sung in chorus by all in the play, but Claire, who is older than most for her grade, was ready to have some individual lines. Also, because the children's own parents were in the play and the audience consisted of friends, they were less self-conscious than they might have been in a more traditional setting for a play.

In the second grade for Claire, kindergarten for Sara, I knew we would do a play portraying a saint's legend and a friend suggest the story of St. Clare. I immediately knew this was right. This time I wrote the play and selected music for it. The play was entitled "St. Clare and the Miracle of the Roses". To prepare for the play I began by telling and acting out the story in school. Briefly, the story tells how Clare the daughter of a rich merchant in northern Italy, hears Francis preach and feels a kinship with him. She decides to give her wealth to follow and work with him; a maid helps her leave the house at night. Clare goes to the chapel of Portiuncula to ask him to accept her into his work; when she gets there, Francis and the monks are waiting for her with lanterns lit. He recognizes her as a sister and accepts her; he takes her rich clothes and gives her a monk's robe and cuts her hair. Later when they are returning from a long journey in which they were helping the sick and the poor they ask for food at a house by the road in winter. The house keeper takes them in, but they hear him criticize them for being together as they are man and woman. Francis says when they leave that she will have to go to work with the other sisters. She asks how long, and he says, "Until this frozen bush blooms." When they look back at the bush it is covered with roses – the message that God wants them to work together. When we acted out this story in school, I used the version in *Stories of the Saints* by Knijpenga in which when Francis accepts Clare, he says that some are born brother and sister and are alike on the outside, but others find brother and sister who are alike on the inside. Claire listened to that and then said "some are both". I sensed that she did not want to exclude that she and her

born sister were alike on the inside. So, I changed the line in the play to include “some are both”. (Allen and Allen in the book Francis of Assisi’s Cantic of the Creatures: A Modern Spiritual Path also talk about Francis experiencing the stars as sisters like Clare and the others in their sanctuary.) The play, which had two acts, was written in loosely rhyming verse; each act began with a song. At the end of the play we sang the first two verses of the Cantic of the Sun as translated by Allen and Allen along with the closing verse.



Second Grade Play, Saint Clare and the Miracle of the Roses. “Rejoice.”

My husband again drew the scene on the blackboard, this time it was the winter hills around Assisi with the chapel in the foreground, light shining from its open door. An empty

gourd vase with white silks around it sat on the floor in front of the board. Claire's painting of St. Francis with outstretched hand waiting for a bird to alight hung on the wall of the classroom. As we had no other families to work with on this play, everyone in our family had a part. My husband was the narrator from behind the scenes (he did not have to memorize his lines!), I was Francis, Claire was Clare, and the kindergartener, Sara, was the maid and the housekeeper. This time Sara had one line – as the housekeeper she got to criticize her older sister (and get away with it).

We began this performance with Claire and I playing on pentatonic lyres and singing a simple song about the sun, while Sara danced, floated around with a golden silk scarf. Then came the first act. Next Claire and I played a song about birds on pentatonic flutes while Sara, this time with a blue silk, “flew”. After the second act Claire and I sang the final song, the Canticle of the Sun. When we finished the audience clapped and as we bowed one mother came up to give us each a rose. Claire took her rose, and then, in sudden inspiration, turned to the tall vase of red roses that had been the site of the miracle in the play, and joyfully gave a rose to every child and adult in the audience. It was a moment of grace. Afterwards the adults did not want to leave the room.

The next year was Third Grade and Kindergarten, and for the first time we performed two plays – one for each child. We could not have accomplished this without cooperating with another family – this time one in which two daughters, Grades One and Five, were participating in Waldorf home schooling. We knew that a fairy tale would be right for my kindergartner, Sara and the first grader, but which one? Sara is very sanguine and the youngest, the first grader, was willing to put her hair up and be a prince – maybe the Frog King? That is what we settled on and I wrote the play about a month before we would perform it. I used a song from Gateways and

wrote two other simple pentatonic songs. Then I quoted description and lines from the Grimm's Fairy tale, ending when the princess and prince were married. We had two practice days together: I was the narrator, the other mother the King, Sara the princess, and the first grader the frog/prince. For the first time Sara had her own play and her older sister wasn't even in it! While we rehearsed, the two older girls watched and worked on their knitting projects. Claire stitched and embroidered a pastel felt ball to be the golden ball for the princess – so she had a part to play after all.

The third-grade play was more of a challenge in some ways because the material, coming from Old Testament stories, was not as familiar to me. I decided to go to the root of the nine-year-old's experience of the dawning of earthly consciousness and do a play about the Fall from Paradise. I studied the Oberufer Paradise Play which is often performed by teachers and parents for the children at Waldorf schools. I decided that I could excerpt part of the play to make a script short enough for us that still clearly told the story. Fabian Lochner, who directs the music program at Sunbridge College, kindly gave me permission to use some music he has written for the play, which he describes as a "combination of Anglican chant and Sibelius". This play tells the story of Adam and Eve in Paradise, the temptation and Fall using a very specific structure: a chorus sings a song that tells what is about to happen and then the scene occurs showing the events. I used the first part of four songs and four scenes beginning with God giving Paradise to Adam and creating Eve and ending with the Angel Gabriel driving them from Paradise. I felt it was important, however, to stress the continuing connection with God so the last lines were Eve saying to the Angel: "My God, forsake me not I pray!" The Angel answers:

Eve cast your doubts away

Cleave to thy husband, thy children tend,

So God forgive thee at the end.

And the last song was “O Holy Trinity” which ends with: “He who can read our mind, grant us his realm to find”.



Third Grade Play, Eden blackboard drawing

For this play I was Adam, my husband was God (his first speaking part on stage) Claire was Eve, the fifth grader was the Angel Gabriel, and the other mother was the devil – who had

two lines spoken from off stage. We rehearsed this play, without my husband, only once together before we performed it. At home, however, in school we rehearsed it several times and sang the songs in circle. The archaic phrasing was interesting to Claire, who memorized four sets of lines beginning with:

Adam, sith man and wife we be,
I pray thee look on yonder tree,
Whereon such lovely fruits abound,
The like of them I never found.
Now to taste it give me leave.



Third Grade Play, "As I am an honest Eve, its is heart's good to eat thereof."

We needed to work out how to perform the two plays in one room and on one day – we decided to have a year-end program which included the two plays and a musical piece performed by the fifth grader. We would use our classroom so once again my husband did the backdrop on the black board. Paradise and the castle and forest in the fairy tale are not difficult to combine, but what about the serpent? I decided that the more intense and serious play, “Adam and Eve in Paradise” should go first, then the musical performance, and then the lighter, mood of the fifth fairy tale. So one panel of the black board was a tree and garden and the other panel a throne with heavenly blue above it. The serpent was hanging down from a branch, in such a way that it could be erased at the interval between plays.

The audience consisted of 6 mothers and 12 children of ages 4-11. Because many of the children were younger, I was worried that the audience would be restless and fidgety for the serious third-grade play. Au contraire. The material and music were so powerful there was a profound silence in the room during the whole performance, and true appreciation as we left the “stage” walking out through the audience. Then the fifth grader played “Barcarolle” by Offenbach on the keyboard. Next, to all the children’s fascination, my husband came out and erased the serpent and replaced it with sky, set up the king’s house, and then the second play began.

Here the mood was completely different. Everyone leaned forward and smiled. The humor in this fairy tale is particularly engaging – the frog sits especially close to eat off the princess’s plate; she carries the frog upstairs using only two fingers. At the end the King stands behind the prince and princess who were married “all by the King’s will. And if they have not died, they are living still”. When the play was over, everyone, audience and players, were

glowing. After all that concentration, all the children exploded out doors to ride a large piece of cardboard down the steep grassy hill across from our house. A perfect ending to the day.



Kindergarten Play, The Frog Prince, the Princess and the Frog

The Importance of Plays

Why do we do plays every year? In each year of the Waldorf curriculum the material meets the child's changing consciousness to help them come fully into that consciousness and to take up the tasks they came here to carry out. A play at the end of the year brings everyone together in intense work with others as well as bringing to life a particular story. For these reasons, the teacher's choice of the story for the play can have a profound effect on children.

When they live so strongly into a story, and a role, it lives in them and helps to form their abilities. The role, when it fits the temperament and situation of the child, can bring out the best in them as they are called to learn it and then actually perform it “on the spot”. As David Mitchell says in his introduction to the book “25 Plays Inspired by Waldorf Teachers”, drama with children “re-awakens the heart memory”. For example, the curriculum in the second grade, the animal fables and legends of the saints, helps young children prepare for their coming change of consciousness (the nine-year change). Before they become so much more aware of time and place and work on the earth, they are shown that human beings have two choices: to be like the animals or to be like the saints. By performing a play of a saint’s legend, we give the children a chance to experience striving for good. Each child, or group of children, have their “heart memories” also, their resonance with certain people and situation of the past. The story of the saint with the same name as my older daughter Claire turned out to be very rich for her. When she was copying a drawing I did of St. Francis accepting Clare into their work at the chapel, she stopped and said the altar was not right, it should be attached to the wall. I said maybe it was, but this made me wonder...

After the teacher has chosen a story for the play, there comes the work of bringing it to the children (see Moffat, 1967, for information on this). First, the teacher tells, not reads, the story as part of school and brings the story alive by experiencing the reality of it. Then the children can work in the rhythmic activity of the day, the circle time, on songs and lines, everyone reciting everything. In this way, the whole story comes alive for everyone. Because the story comes out of the curriculum, it enhances rather than detracting from school work (there is always time to do a play). At the younger ages, lines are spoken in chorus or just by the narrator so that children do not feel too “singled out” and, thereby, become aware of themselves

as individuals too early. Parts can be decided by the teacher or worked out by the group, the latter increasingly as the children grow older.

The practical work of setting the stage and making costumes can be worked into the handwork and craft aspects of the curriculum. I taught my third grader three different embroidery stitches in the process of her making the “golden ball” for her sister’s play. We always do artistic work with the story, painting and drawing scenes from it.

Coordinating our family with others has been a very rewarding experience. When it happens that another family has children at a similar level and we can find a story that works for them all, magic happens when we do a play. This brings me to the topic of the role of community in homeschooling.

Community

A home school is a community in which a group of people work to connect and, thereby, form the conditions for receiving guidance from above. But the family is also part of larger communities – those in a church, a festival group, other home schoolers, for example (Lantro, 1999). We have been privileged to be part of a group of families that celebrate the festivals as renewed through Anthroposophy (Read, 1997), and the mothers and children in this group have always graciously consented to be the audience for our plays. We are privileged to have a group with which we have such strong spiritual connections. Sometimes as part of this group, sometimes not, another family is home schooling using the Waldorf curriculum and the conditions are right for us to join together for school plays. The bonds that are formed in this work never dissolve; I am sure.

Rudolf Steiner gave a verse for meditation that is often used by groups working together. (From Verses and Meditations, p. 117):

The healthy social life is found
When in the mirror of each human soul
The whole community finds its reflection,
And when in the community
The virtue of each one is living.

As I read Steiner's description, in *Man – Hieroglyph of the Universe*, of the correspondence between the human heart and the sun, I was struck with the meaning of the verse given above.

Steiner says (p. 46-47):

The heart... is nothing more than a product of the blood circulation. If we can understand what the heart is in the human body we shall learn to understand also that the sun is not, as Newton calls it, the general cable-pulley which sends its ropes (called the force of gravitation) towards the planets, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, and so forth, drawing them by these unseen forces of attraction, or spraying out light to them and the like; but that just as the movement of the heart is a product of the life-force of the circulation, so the sun is not other than the product of the whole planetary system. The sun is the result, not the point of departure. The living cooperation of the solar system produces in the center a hollow, which reflects as a mirror. That is the Sun!

The individuals make the community that is at their center to reflect back themselves – selves that are transformed after going into the center, the heart, which is the community. Thus, the community is reflected in each individual, and each individual finds the virtue of their self in the community.

As we emerge from the experience of each school year of the Waldorf curriculum with our class play in the community of our friends, the children find themselves more and more strongly and surely. I cannot be grateful enough.

Who will we work with on plays in the first and fourth grade? Maybe this year it will be two other families. What will our plays be? A fairy tale for first grade, and as for the fourth, I can hear the Kalevala calling.....

Resources

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