

**A Coming of Age: Dialogues about *Dramawise* and the Elements of Drama**

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Sue Davis in conversation with Brad Haseman, John O'Toole, Judith McLean, Sandra Gattenhof, Penny Bundy, Stephen Davis and Adrienne Jones.

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### **Introduction**

Twenty-first birthdays still tend to signal a coming of age and give cause for celebration. Such rites of passage are also times for reflection and recognition of achievements, as well as considering prospects and hopes for the future. Such a time is upon us as this year as *Dramawise* (Haseman & O'Toole, 1987) a key text that has influenced the field of Drama education in Queensland, other Australian states and other countries (with it now being available in Chinese, Italian and Danish) turns 21. So it seems timely to consider the heritage and impact of this text as well as consider its relevance for the field of drama in a new millennium.

In the Queensland context this reflective stage has been prompted by the development of a new syllabus for the Senior subject of Drama (Queensland Studies Authority, 2007), one that attempts to embrace the breadth of practice that may be drama in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A number of us have been involved in writing a new textbook to support this syllabus implementation. *Dramatexts* (Strube et al., 2008) pays homage to *Dramawise* and early on in its development we wanted to consult with our 'elder statesmen' to see how they felt about the 'Elements of Drama', how they saw the impact of the work and its relevance now. This reflective article therefore draws on interviews conducted with the authors of *Dramawise* – Brad Haseman and John O'Toole. It also draws on interviews with other leading drama educators and practitioners. There is a particular focus on the Queensland context as this is the context John and Brad were operating within at the time of the publication of *Dramawise* and where I am writing from.

### **Background to the development of *Dramawise***

The inclusion of Drama as a specific subject within the Queensland curriculum has a history that is now nearly thirty-five years old. I was a student in a state school during the mid 70s and was among some of the first students to complete Speech and Drama as a subject at Senior Secondary level. The professional association for Drama in Education

(then known as QADIE, now Drama Queensland) was initiated in 1976 and early members were instrumental in the development of syllabus documents and curriculum materials that drew on international developments in relation to teaching drama as a process and as an artform. Two of the early members who met through this association were Brad Haseman and John O'Toole. Both had developed a passion for drama while at school, John through performing in school plays and Brad through studying private AMEB Speech and Drama. Both of them had become teachers and were keen to try and make drama happen in the classroom but weren't quite sure how. John signed on to do a drama course with teachers such as Gavin Bolton and Dorothy Heathcote, Brad heard very positive reports about Dorothy's work when she visited Australia in the mid 70s and then he traveled to the UK to study more about the practice of educational drama.

In 1979 there were 730 students taking Speech and Drama in Years 11 and 12, by 2006 there were 12 795 studying Senior Drama (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006). In between this time, the actual name and conceptualization of the subject has seen several key changes. The original subject was called Speech and Drama, an additional subject "Theatre" became available in the 1980s. Both these subjects were combined into the one subject "Drama" in the mid 1990s. Brad and John were instrumental in this merger and to some degree the development of the "Elements of Drama" (EOD) and *Dramawise* emerged from this process.

**Brad:** So when I returned to Australia in 1978 we had two kinds of drama syllabuses in Queensland. We had the Speech and Drama syllabus and then Theatre was developed too. Of course there had been a bitter split the UK between theatre and child or improvised drama, and we wanted to avoid that here. So we had to ask ourselves, what is the glue that binds these two syllabuses together. ...So finding the elements of drama became really important. The elements are the same but manifest themselves in different ways in improvised forms and in performance, so the syllabuses accented them differently. The Board (Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, now the Queensland Studies Authority) later integrated the two syllabuses into one 'Drama' syllabus (Interview transcript, 21/01/2008, p 3)

Both Brad and John acknowledge however that they are by no means the first to have talked about there being some kind of key components to the artform of drama. They

both acknowledge the foundational work of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton's work and others.

**John:** We're not the first ones to define these kinds of key components. I think at the time the book by Roma Burgess & Pamela Gaudry *A Time for Drama* (Burgess & Gaudry, 1985) defined some elements very similarly. Of course you can also go right back to Aristotle and in fact you can draw some parallels between his elements and ours.

**Brad:** The idea for the elements emerged from Gavin Bolton's work. He was looking at tension and other kinds of components that might be common to drama works. Dorothy also had a set of key elements or components of drama. We felt at the time we needed to identify what was at the heart of the root artform that is drama. We tried to lay out in a clear and coherent way a set of elements that people couldn't really argue with, whether they were theatre people, or child drama people. (Interview transcript, 21/01/2008, p 3)

### **The Elements of Drama and Queensland Syllabus context**

John O'Toole was heavily involved in the writing team for the first senior Drama syllabus along with drama colleagues such as inaugural Drama State Panel Chair Judith McLean. In Queensland we have had a school-based assessment system in place for nearly 30 years. This assessment system works because of the work of practicing teachers and other educators who are members of District Review and the State Review Panels. Panellists meet twice a year to moderate the standards of student work (based on submitted work samples) against exit criteria of the syllabus. These exit criteria are therefore key components of any syllabus and the influence of the EOD can be seen in the original Drama syllabus criteria. 1993 Syllabus Exit criteria:

#### **Forming**

- Elements of drama
- Form, content and context

#### **Presenting**

- Demonstrating the elements of drama
- Acting techniques
- Realisation of style

#### **Responding**

- Knowledge and understanding of drama

- Analysis, synthesis and evaluation
- Communications skills (Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, 1993)

As Judith McLean identifies the EOD helped bridge the gap between the two previous syllabuses and helped the Queensland drama community establish a common language for how we could talk about what we did:

Judith: I think the strength of their work was that it gave us a common grammar, we really didn't have that before. We therefore had this content that belonged to Drama, it also stabilized meaning enough for teachers to be confident in teaching processually. Before that we were doing plays and history – a fairly neo-classical approach really, but the 'Elements of Drama' gave us the operational content and the mechanics of how drama works. This is not to say there weren't other versions around ... but this model was developed by two colleagues who contextualized the elements and gave us very practical examples for the classroom.

... I also think that *Dramawise* and John O'Toole's *The Process of Drama* (O'Toole, 1992) helped people see that process drama was an artform in itself that could sit alongside plays and performances. No text before theirs did that quite so well. (Interview notes, 31/03/2008)

#### **Developments and critiques**

The Senior Drama syllabus having a key focus on the EOD meant that as schools wrote work programs and purchased resources, *Dramawise* became a defacto mandatory textbook in Queensland schools (there are no set texts in Queensland). Most drama programs also tended to begin with a unit which focused on teaching the EOD, some in relation to a particular context or text, others as a basic introductory unit with each element unpacked. Throughout the two year course various elements may have been focused on within particular units (e.g. an acting unit might look specifically at human context and tension, a Greek Theatre and ritual unit might focus on mood and symbol). When students responded to drama (reviewing live theatre performances or playscripts for example) they have often been required to focus on how several specific elements have been manipulated and the impact of decisions made. This meant a very specific focus on the EOD (rather than perhaps on the context for creating or reading the work, or conventions of a particular form or style). This can be seen as having both positive and negative implications.

**Judith:** I think that in some cases people isolated the elements and taught them out of context. I think this at times lead to very dry and boring drama teaching. However, it's strength was the grammar of drama, whether you saw a play, read a play, were performing or forming, there were these elements you could discuss, explore and experiment with. (Interview notes, 31/03/2008)

John has also been somewhat critical of the EOD as being seen as a kind of linear recipe, made up of separate element and being taught that way.

**John:** I am aware of the limitations of this kind of structuralist model of what are in their manifestations, very dynamic elements (p 2)... I do have some unease about how they might be used and the linear way they are presented in a book. In any drama work of course, all the elements are there and they operate and inter-relate in relation to the context. Their manifestation is dependent on the contextual factors. So you can't regard them in a vacuum. (Interview transcript, 21/01/2008, p4)

Brad has also been critical of the kind of throughline presented in the original model and the idea that Drama needs to contain all the elements, considered in that particular way. In 2000 Brad presented a seminar at a Drama Queensland conference where he shared this view and questioned the way EOD actually operate in a lot of contemporary performance (Haseman, 2000). I can recall the agitated conversations that could be heard as people emerged from his session. Some people were horrified to think that Haseman himself seemed to be critiquing their own EOD model. This was something I asked Brad about in our interview and what he identified was that he wasn't necessarily saying the EOD don't work or exist anymore, but that there may be different 'compounds' of elements that underpin different kinds of performance now. What Brad was identifying was that at least one of these compounds might be comprised mainly of elements from the 'lower' half of the model, rather than the top half.

**Brad:** I think there are some shortcomings in the model, but it's not necessarily caused by the elements. With the benefit of 21 years hindsight I think the problem is the throughline we imposed on them. Our linear model points to only one way the elements can be combined but I believe now that the elements can be compounded in different ways. If you think of the periodic table in science, the various elements are separate but can be combined and compounded in new ways to create new chemical compounds. So we can combine the elements of drama to create new dramatic compounds – or forms.

I think now with a lot of contemporary performance we see much highly imaginative work that does not work with the causality linear we set down. Tension for instance can build through the counterpointing and juxtaposition of elements such as space and mood – it does not have to be built through the dramatic context and focus. So the compound of contemporary performance may manipulate all the elements of drama but in a very different way. It might start with place, not with human context at all. (Interview transcript, 21/01/08, p 5)

This view was very similar to the kind of critique offered by Sandra Gattenhof who had previously told me that she had problems with seeing the EOD working in relation to her teaching work in the field of contemporary performance:

**Sandra:** A lot of the work you can call 'contemporary performance', post-dramatic theatre (Lehmann, 2006) and so on, really seems to focus on the bottom half of the elements. Elements such as human context, situation, roles and relationships don't really operate. Tension sits with the audience, not explicitly in the work.

... In their original model, Haseman and O'Toole talked about tension 5, that blurring of the boundary between the real and the fictional. I think since then it's mainly described as metaxis. This kind of tension is where a lot of contemporary performance work operates. It's not really about tension driven from the narrative. The narrative is made up by the audience through the process of intertextuality. Often you get a focus on elements such as time and place. Mood and symbol are very strong in this kind of work and language is there but perhaps the nature of the language is different. (Interview transcript, 26/03/2008, p 1)

This critique of the way tension might work for different participants and audience members was also a key feature of discussions I had with Penny Bundy who had also expressed to me her reservations about the EOD framework.

**Penny:** ... there's lots of different kinds of tension I think that can arise from the participants or audience perception of and interaction with the drama. .. I think the versions of tension as identified by Haseman and O'Toole probably worked from the premise of process drama, of narrative tension and being felt from the inside. They weren't so much about the experience of tension from the outside. (Interview notes, 28/03/2008, p 2)

Stimulated by curiosity about her own response to specific drama and theatre performances, for her PhD research (Bundy, 1999) Penny explored the nature of tension at play in her response to various works, and in the response of participants and audiences to several performances she devised with students. She found that tension, created through traditional notions of conflict, surprise, mystery or dilemma was mild if at all existent in some cases. Her research lead her to recognise that people react in different ways to the same dramatic moment or sequence of moments. She concluded that dramatic tension is not contained in the drama (let alone in the narrative) but in the spectators and participants as they experience it. She now asserts that there is another kind of tension at play in drama and that is the 'Tension of intimacy' or what she now believes could be called "Tension of engagement".

When I asked John about Penny's work he was supportive of this concept but reiterated that at the time of writing *Dramawise* they were trying to identify different kinds of 'dramatic' tension that could operate within drama. This was particularly with a desire to move people beyond the idea that dramatic tension equaled conflict. He also suggested that some of these kinds of tension that the audience might experience in their perception of the work, could be seen as versions of the EOD tensions, but seen from the perspective of the audience member, rather than sitting within the drama itself.

**John:** I think for example, Penny Bundy's work on the 'tension of intimacy' is very interesting and perhaps we might add the term 'communitas' (see the work of Victor Turner, Bjorn Rassmussen and Schechner). We're talking here about things like the tension of a communal event, the pleasure of being involved with another group of people in a community event. In a way I think it relates to the tension of the task, in a group sense. We're talking about the audience and the actors together being driven by this communal intimacy, experiencing this event



together and there's a kind of tension related to how this will go and what conclusion we'll reach. (Interview transcript, 21/01/2008, p4)

It would seem that what people were saying here is that the original model may not have considered the impact of context enough and the experience of the drama from the perspective of the audience/participant, a lot of this interaction relies on the term 'dramatic meaning'. However the work of *Dramawise* in opening up the possibilities for students seeing different ways they could use tension and try to engage an audience has been significant. The considerable work now emerging around the concept of metaxis, audience engagement and reception would indicate this is an area that is worth revisiting and interrogating in our work with students.

Support for teaching the EOD from an unexpected source during the process of writing for our new drama textbook. I was interviewing Stephen Davis for a chapter on scriptwriting for the book. Stephen studied Drama in a Queensland high school and then went on to study acting at QUT. He moved onto writing and several of his plays (*Blurred*, *Juice* and *Burnt*) have been published and are popular texts in many drama classrooms. Since that time Stephen has gone on to write for film, television, media and employed his writing skills and knowledge in a wide range of contexts. He has analysed many film scripts for various funding agencies and production companies and teaches screenwriting. I had been asking him whether he thought Drama students could learn from some of the work on dramatic structure from the film industry, when support for the EOD appeared unexpectedly.

**Stephen:** I've read a lot of books about film-making and film structure. They really end up talking about character and using classic drama analysis. The same old paradigms and elements from the Greeks are just re-interpreted and repackaged... However, a lot of people writing for film could still learn a lot from the elements of drama.

**Sue:** When you say the 'elements of drama', which do you mean?

**Stephen:** I actually still find that the Haseman/O'Toole breakdown works quite well. It's a simple model and it works. It's not like I practically think about them before I write, but post writing you can use them to analyse the work. For example, how has time been used as an emphasis to support the focus of the

narrative? How has symbol been used to create allusion? I use those sorts of questions with my students too all the time.

**Sue:** So really, the elements of drama, the ones that are taught in drama in schools, you find them useful when writing for film?

**Stephen:** Absolutely, they're user friendly but incredibly helpful. I probably talk about contrast though too (Interview transcript, 21/03/2008, pp5-6)

### **Drama Revisions**

In the next version of the Senior Syllabus in 2001 (Queensland Studies Authority, 2001) the focus of the syllabus on the EOD was again reinforced, though this time it was broadened somewhat. In the intervening period, drama teachers had found that knowing about the EOD and being able to work with them was helpful, however you also needed to understand more about how they could be shaped and worked, what kinds of structures and conventions could be used to create effective drama. The work of Jonathon Neelands (Neelands & Goode, 1990, 2000) was particularly influential in this case, and with both the development of the drama components of The Arts Years 1-10 syllabus and the redeveloped Senior syllabus, there was a shift to a focus on the 'elements of drama and dramatic conventions'. This focus was once again explicit across the exit criteria for the subject. QSA 2001, pp26-27).

### **Drama visions**

2007 saw the revision of the Senior Syllabus again - as part of the regular revision cycle - and this time there is shift away from the explicit focus specifically on the EOD that has been there in the past. This is not to say they aren't there, they are. However the term that is being used now within the core components is 'Dramatic Languages'. As well as the EOD this term encompasses skills of performance, styles and their conventions, text and context. The intent from the sub-committee that developed the syllabus was that they wanted to open up practice to embrace new forms of drama and performance - both live and virtual. The other key shift has been the framing of the use of these 'dramatic languages' by the requirement that drama programs include a focus on both heritage perspectives (defined in the syllabus as before 1980) and contemporary perspectives (defined as post 1980). This was included to ensure that students would be able to access

texts and experiences drawing on different times, places and cultures and not just the tried and true.

**Adrienne:** I want to say that the EOD are still clearly foundational for studying drama, and I'd be worried if people thought that was no longer the case. However the syllabus committee wanted to find ways to get people to explore new areas of creative practice and contemporary performance.

We wanted to embrace new directions in drama, incorporating creative practice which was multi-disciplinary, screen culture, physical theatre and contemporary performance. We wanted to provide some stepping stones, some ways in for teachers.... The use of the term dramatic languages and the idea of skills of performance was that this would build on the EOD and flesh out the kinds of skills and components that you could manipulate within contemporary dramatic forms. (Interview notes, 4 April, 2008)

When I asked John how he felt about the inclusion of these other components he explained that the EOD were never meant to represent all the elements that could be used in the processes of forming, presenting and responding. He acknowledged that there were always other specific performance and theatrical elements, but that the EOD were really the key elements of the 'dramatic form'.

So with the elements of drama, we were really talking about the elements of the 'dramatic form' and this can be in process drama or theatre. We're not talking about all the possible elements of drama that can be used in the creation of drama or the presentation of drama. (Interview transcript, 21/01/2008, p 2)

For me this has been a key idea emerging from my interviews with Brad and John and in considering the place of the EOD in trying to develop a model for dramatic languages. EOD therefore are still there within the core of our work as key building blocks to explore and play with in the development, presentation of and analysis of drama, but they're not the full picture and were never meant to be.

**John:** I think the elements still have a place, even with whiskers. The notion of a set of elements that underpin our work is still useful, even in grown up theatre. I think you can still take the elements of drama and apply them in your work in Forming, Presenting and Responding. However for each task or function that you're undertaking there may be other elements that are specific to that. For example, with presenting you are going to be looking at the elements of drama but also specific acting and performance elements or skills. For performance design you will need to look at visual arts design elements. So perhaps you could have a

diagram that had the elements of the dramatic form at the centre and then different elements linked to each dimension or artistic role. (Interview transcript, 21/01/2008, p 5-6)

This has therefore been something we have been investigating in our new text. Finding a way to represent the importance of the EOD but also identify the various other layers or components of different creative practice in relation to drama. (*include model*)

Another catalyst for the shift in focus from the EOD to dramatic languages was in fact the provocations from Brad Haseman which for the Drama Queensland community were presented through Brad's aforementioned 2000 workshop (Haseman, 2000) and a keynote in 2001 (Haseman, 2001). During this keynote Brad explained how he believed that the practice of 'redactive creativity' was now a key features of the creative work of young people and many contemporary artists.

Originally from an obscure branch of theology, 'redaction criticism' was used to uncover the cultural presuppositions of the gospel writers as they edited their materials.... It is my contention that redactive creativity drives the most common artists process of contemporary art making. Artists find these redactive processes broaden creative possibilities for meaning and it does this by harnessing fragmentation, appropriation, intertextuality and technology. (Haseman, 2001: 6)

This was also where Brad suggested that the *Dramawise* model may not fit many of the contemporary works created through these redactive processes. In this keynote and other places Brad has reinforced this kind of perspective and shown a particular interest in work which plays with 'compounds' emphasizing the bottom half of EOD model. He has also questioned what it might be in relation to drama that it might now be essential to teach.

The problem is that when I observe the sophisticated, redactive methods young people employ to create their one person shows I'm no longer certain what drama skills are essential for me to teach. (Haseman, 2001: 11)

However when I asked Brad what he now thought in regard to teaching and working with the EOD – do we forget about them, are they no longer relevant, I was somewhat surprised and comforted by his response.

**Brad:** However I still want to say that I think for students, knowing those elements is important. They're like the building blocks. You can play with them, juggle them around and still end up with highly watchable forms. The dominant manifestations of drama are still captured by this model but I'd take out all the black lines. (p 5) I don't think you start in the 'mess' though. You start with what drama is, the traditional structures in the west -- and acknowledging there have always been other ways of doing drama in other cultures. We need to look at what compounds have created what kinds of drama. By the end of a drama course though I think students should be open to all sorts of manifestations of them and different compounds. (Interview transcript, 21/01/08, p 6)

I've also watched with appreciation Brad's own recent creative practice which is still very much concerned with role, human context and tension. Over the past few years Brad has been involved in utilising his process drama skills in devising a number of 'propheticals' that have been used in the health sector and senior executive training.. Brad explains that with his 'propheticals' the players create a prophecy or foretelling of possible future events, which is also a hypothetical proposition therefore blending truth and fiction to present dramatic scenarios which are reasoned speculations on the future. His successful 2007 ARC grant also draws on process drama practice to build capacity around HIV/AIDS health promotion in Papua New Guinea. Whilst some people in the Queensland drama community thought Brad has retreated somewhat from his commitment to the EOD, it would appear that this is not actually the case, and certainly not in terms of them being important basic knowledge for drama students.

John also affirmed that he still finds the EOD model useful and that he would even keep the 'lines' intact. He affirmed that for him and particularly with the process drama and applied theatre work he has been involved in that role, relationships, situation and tension are still often the starting points for planning a drama.

**John:** For me, human context drives it. The dramatic form draws on something that exists before the situation, that's the human context and then there's a situation or characters or a dilemma -- something you choose to make explicit -- your dramatic idea. You begin with something and then you start bringing the elements of the dramatic form to the table. (Interview transcript, 21/01/2008, p 4)

### Looking forward to the next celebration

My journey through the course of writing for this new textbook and for this article has had elements of the 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party about it – the excitement, communal celebration and coming together, late nights and bad mornings. I am most appreciative however of the gifts that have been given so generously, and certainly the contributions of those people interviewed within this article have been part of that. It has been great to gather members of the clan together and to share stories about where we've been and ruminate on what might be ahead. In reflecting on the legacy of *Dramawise* it seemed evident that there were indeed wisdoms about drama that were captured in this book. For many drama educators the work was foundational in establishing our common ground. As our field of creative practice is interrogated, reworked and repurposed the 'Elements of Drama' continue to be keystones to our practice, however the other materials and structures that we build with may be drawn from a range of different sources. What is exciting to see is that our 'elder statesmen' have by no means rested on their laurels, they continue to interrogate their own practice and inspire us to do the same. I'll leave you with their final responses to my question about their thoughts on drama for the future.

**John:** I think the whole shift to exploring the impact of the technological and the digital world on drama is interesting.... For example there are people now just discovering the power of using role in online simulations and they think they've invented role-play. ...I'm also excited about the work that's occurring within what is being called 'Applied Theatre' or 'Applied Drama'. I think this kind of work is having an impact on the way we conceive of drama as something that takes place in theatres – drama happens and can happen in different kinds of spaces and places. And this drama can still be powerful and we're still working within the artform. (Interview transcript, 21/01/2008, p 6)

**Brad:** What is drama at the moment? We need to keep asking that for it is always being regenerated and refreshed. The arts have always been the testing ground for philosophy, for new ideas. With the impact of popular culture, the significance of digital culture and screen products for young people and the blurring of reality and fiction, different things become exciting in performance. The well made narrative now seems to work best on screen. For the live experience, we want more. Now the assembly and manipulation of the elements may start somewhere else, maybe with movement and time for example, but the elements are always present, held in varying dramatic compounds. It's exciting and the key to innovation in our art form. There are other configurations and we shouldn't assume the way we've put the elements together in the past is only what drama can be in the future. (Interview transcript, 21/01/2008, p7)

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