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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Your Majesty, Do You Have a Headache?" Reflections on Distancing as Vertical Re-framing in a Process Drama on Loneliness

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This reflective practitioner paper explores aesthetic distancing within a process drama workshop titled 'Red Lanterns', facilitated by John O'Toole at the 2025 Hellenic Drama/Theatre Network conference. Drawing from the legend of the Red Lantern Festival and structured for 7-9-year-olds, the drama explored the theme of loneliness through a sequence of embodied, improvisational and collaborative strategies. Engaging in multiple roles, from village child to imperial maid, the author reflects on the layered dynamics of the elements of drama (Haseman & O'Toole, 2017), metaxis (O'Toole, 1992), Quadripartite Thinking (Bowell & Heap, 2017) and distancing (Eriksson, 2022). Central to the analysis of distancing is the concept of vertical re-framing, defined as the manipulation of distance via a vertical re-orientation of the elements of place and role, which led to the experience of temporal verticality (Bachelard, 2016). The paper highlights moments of aesthetic engagement, particularly through the metaphor of the fire-breathing goose and the paradox of exploring isolation through group artistry. The paper contributes to practice-based scholarship in drama education by offering a first-person narrative of reflective practice. Ultimately, this reflective commentary illustrates process drama as a poetic-pedagogical encounter that enables participants to interpret multiple roles and contemplate complex issues from dissonant viewpoints, through creative collaboration.

Introduction

This paper offers a reflective practitioner commentary on a process drama workshop and demonstration led by John O'Toole at the *Hellenic Drama/ Theatre Network conference* at the Pallini music school, Athens, in March 2025.

The 'Red Lanterns' drama structure, published as Exemplar 4, 'The Emperor and the Magic Goose', in *Pretending to Learn* (O'Toole & Dunn, 2020), was created as part of a Chinese drama in education project, and originally facilitated with Chinese teachers and students. The story used by the teacher as a pre-text is one of the many legends of the origin of the annual Red Lantern Festival, celebrated throughout China and overseas. This pre-text is printed as an appendix to the article.

Duffy (2015) defines reflective practice as 'a way of being' as a teacher. It is an orientation to reflective action in the classroom that considers mistakes not as "taboo happenings to be avoided" but as "necessary parts of learning about oneselves as practitioners and our practice" (p. 5). As such, a reflective

practitioner attitude may be described as a meta-cognitive approach to one's practice (Neelands, 2006; Schön, 1983). As a reflective practioner piece, this article may serve as a guide for readers conducting their own analyses or considering participants' responses in workshops they lead. The discussion offers a full immersion in the 'Red Lanterns' drama, contemplated through the lens of aesthetic experience, with attention to theoretical constructs such as the elements of drama (Haseman & O'Toole, 2017), metaxis (O'Toole, 1992), quadripartite thinking (Bowell & Heap, 2017) and distancing (Eriksson, 2022).

Key Constructs

Before diving in, it may be helpful to briefly delineate some key constructs. It was John O'Toole, among others, who coined the term 'process drama' in his 1990 NADIE[1] keynote in Sydney. Indeed, the expression 'process drama' appears to be one of those phrases that emerged almost spontaneously to fill a gap in the contemporary language of the time, associated with the work of Heathcote (1991), Bolton (1979) and O'Neill (1995).

The term 'process drama' appeared in print for the first time in Haseman's article, 'Improvisation, Process drama and dramatic art', in the *Drama Magazine* (Haseman, 1991). O'Toole himself was among the first scholars to use it, and he then went on to define and conceptualise it in his *The Process of Drama* (1992) as the "negotiation and renegotiation of the elements of dramatic form, in terms of the context and purpose of the participants" (p. 2).

Haseman and O'Toole (1987) outline the elements of dramatic form as: *context* (*situation* and *roles*), directed by *focus*, driven by *tension*, made explicit in *time* and *space*, through *language* and *movement*, to create *mood* and *symbol*, which together create *meaning*. In their most recent version, they also include *narrative*, adding: "When performed to an audience, this becomes theatre" (2017, i). One of these elements, dramatic tension, can be experienced in various forms, including *metaxis*. A Greek term, metaxis translates as 'betwixt and between' and refers to the tension arising from a clash between emotions felt in the drama and in real life (O'Toole, 1992). For Bowell and Heap (2017), "accepting the circumstances of a fiction as 'real' while simultaneously perceiving it for the fiction that it is" is essential to understand how drama works, as "fiction and reality are in juxtaposition to each other" (p. 5).

Considering these dynamics, Bowell and Heap (2017) point to four levels of intentionality that co-exist while engaged in drama: the *playwright*, *director*, *actor*, and *teacher*'s intentionality. These functions operate concurrently, generating a process of Quadripartite Thinking (QT).

1 NADIE, the National Association for Drama in Education, is now known as Drama Australia.

Moreover, Bowell and Heap acknowledge an overarching dimension within QT, that of *self-spectator* – a term introduced by Heathcote, also known as the "watcher in the head" (Heathcote in Matusiak-Varley, 2016, p. 298).

For Bowell and Heap, the self-spectator function relates to a critical awareness of wearing each hat (playright, director, actor and teacher) working together. As the authors put it: "Drama is experienced by both the self-interacting self and the self interacting with others" (p. 6).

The notion of self-spectator calls into play another key construct, aesthetic distance. Indeed, distancing "is the factor which births the self-spectator" (Heathcote in Eriksson, 2014, p. 5). Aesthetic distance can be described as the metaphorical space between awareness of the self and of dramatic role, operating in the 'as if' context of drama:

> 'Drama' is a spontaneous human process whereby we think and act in an 'as if' fiction while, simultaneously, we are engaged in the living process. Theatre codifies into art form the kinds of feelings created in all human spontaneous and dramatic acts. However, this happens in varying degrees between the most *absorbed* and the most *distanced*. (Courtney, 1995, p. 3, my emphasis)

The affective dimension of process drama has been theorised by Bolton (1979, 1986), who drew on Vygotsky's (1976) seminal notion of 'dual affect' in play theory to explain the relationship between 'raw' and 'filtered' emotions in drama. It has been explored by Dunn, Bundy and Stinson (2015, 2020), as well as Dunn and Stinson (2012), who describe process drama as an experience where students and teacher "operate in a state of knowing in both the real and fictional worlds" (Dunn & Stinson, 2012, p. 205). In this dual state of knowing, identification with dramatic role is neither univocal nor linear; rather, it involves a partnership between students and teachers who experience and reflect on the overlapping of distant perspectives. This condition is facilitated by the kaleidoscopic structure of the dramatic form:

> Just like a kaleidoscope, the structure of process drama multiplies interpretations of a dramatic event, allowing participants to explore its complexity. (Piazzoli & Tiozzo, 2022, p. 28, author's translation)

The process drama described in this paper serves as an illuminating example of the kaleidoscopic nature of process drama, as it generated multiple interpretations of the same dramatic event. In particular, this paper introduces a novel concept, 'vertical re-framing', the manipulation of distance via a vertical re-orientation of the elements of *place* and *role*. At this point, the reader may have become saturated with theories and constructs, and the best way to proceed is to let practice take the stage.

Reflective Commentary

This section features a step-by-step reflective commentary on the 'Red Lanterns' process drama. The commentary is organised in 20 steps, written from the point of view of the author, who was a participant in the workshop. The writing style is as much personal as analytical, in line with the reflexive approach of the reflective practitioner tradition, and makes use of the first person pronoun. In each step, the dramatic strategies are indicated in **bold**; the elements of drama are formatted in *italics*, while roles appear in ALL CAPS. The commentary is structured following O'Toole and Dunn's (2003)'s main phases of a typical process drama: initiation, experiential and reflective phases, and is preceded by a brief positionality statement.

Positionality

As a writer, I understand that the commentary below is not neutral, but shaped by my experiences. I acknowledge, with De Freitas (2008), that positionality statements are never innocent, but curated representations of one's biography: "Readers of reflexive narratives are often led to believe, through the rhetoric of reflexivity, that they have unfettered access to the interior thoughts of the researcher" (p. 2). This is not the case in this paper. The reflection below is an abridged version of my writing post-workshop, calibrated to the article's focus.

My professional training and lived experience inform my reception of the 'Red Lanterns' process drama. As such, my experience of the workshop might be different from that of others who attended it. I am an experienced drama practitioner, arts researcher and lecturer. I have a natural inclination to reflect in and on action, a skill learnt through a reflective practitioner PhD on the artistry of process drama for language learning (Piazzoli, 2013), under the supervision of Prof. Julie Dunn. Since 2008, I have had the privilege of teaching drama in education at Griffith University, Brisbane, and, in the last ten years, at Trinity College Dublin.

My lived experience also informs my responses to the workshop below. I am an introverted woman who left home at the age of 19 in search of a new identity on the other side of the world. As a young migrant, I found myself engulfed in an abusive relationship involving domestic violence – a cycle I managed to break after 12 years. Though I signed my divorce papers more than a decade ago, moved overseas and re-built a family, those scars are still deep-seated within me; I have developed an extreme aversion to narcissistic individuals and hypersensitivity to power abuse. I thrive in collaborative, creative work.

Initiation Phase

1. The workshop leader, recognising a motley group of conference participants, started the workshop with a **warm up**, exchanging different greetings to get us to know each other and familiarise ourselves with the space. The

instructions were clear, the task was stress-free. I perceived a cosy atmosphere, which helped me to ease into the work and establish a sense of connection.

2. Through a **continuum of experience check**, the facilitator gauged the participants' different levels of familiarity with process drama, and then adjusted his planning, and particularly his explanations of the origins and basic principles of the form, accordingly. I appreciated how he highlighted key planning concepts like 'the hook' (O'Toole & Dunn, 2002) and distancing as 'safeguarding' (Eriksson, 2022). He next offered information on the context of this drama, as not everyone was familiar with it.

3. In his way of launching the **pre-text**, a story of one of the original legends of the 'Red Lanterns Festival' still widely observed in China and beyond, I observed his pedagogical tact in providing the written text while narrating the legend, as many of us were speakers of English as an additional language.

   While listening to the story,[2] I wondered whether this could be a case of cultural appropriation. While O'Toole developed this legend with a Chinese practitioner, none of us in the room identified with Chinese culture. Did we have a right to explore the legend? In that moment, I recalled Afolabi's (2023) lucid analysis of the fear of cultural appropriation, described as a fear of "engaging with the knowledge and practices of others, even within the classroom setting, including theatre," which can, on occasions, stifle creativity and learning (p. 482). Afolabi offers a useful framework to discern between 'appreciation' and 'appropriation'. I recognised my intention to maintain a respectful attitude, coupled with genuine curiosity about Chinese culture. With that, I was able to set the concern aside and move on.

4. The teacher introduced the **focus** of the 'Red Lanterns' drama as an exploration of *loneliness*. This would guide and channel the dramatic exploration throughout the work all the way through to the final discussion.

2 Readers unfamiliar with the story may find it helpful to read the pre-text in the appendix at this point, to better engage with the commentary that follows.

5. The teacher then introduced the **Focus Question** (FQ) underpinning the drama: "What makes people do mean things? And how can we best deal with them?" The FQ, as O'Toole and Dunn (2020) put it, shapes most aspects of planning a process drama. I thought that language of the FQ was well suited to the original age group (7-9 years old), and I was intrigued as to how this complemented the focus, *loneliness*.

6. Next, O'Toole introduced **the hook**, which he described as the immediate attention catcher in a drama. This drama was targeted at 7-9-year-olds, so the hook, he stated, was the magic goose. I thought to myself: "Not much of a hook for me, as an adult, but I can see it would have an appeal to children of that age. Will I be able to suspend disbelief and let myself be hooked by a magic goose?" I was sceptical. "How can a fire-breathing magic goose hook *me*?" Well, read on!

7. We were guided through a **movement sequence** (walk straight, diagonally, lightly) playing skilfully with elements of dance like locomotion, levels, dynamics, rhythm. This step was functional, I thought at the time, as the teacher was helping us to activate our bodies in space. Indeed, this instantly awakened my somatic awareness – somewhat dormant, on that early morning. It wasn't until later that I realised the vital importance of this step. This was, effectively, a way to get us ready for the embodiment of the goose. The teacher pointed out how this would need more time but it did function well, at least for me, to become aware of the infinite possibilities of the body-in-space. Years of Butoh practice, tacit in my muscle memory, made me wide awake (Greene, 1995).

   As a practitioner, in that moment I realised that although I always incorporate movement sequences in my process drama practice, they are never designed as transition between phases of a drama. Note to self: experiment with movement sequences as a transition between phases in my own drama work.

Experiential Phase

8. The movement sequence ended with a clumping/group formation task that transitioned us into groups, ready for the next phase: **building belief** in the dramatic context. We formed three clusters – seven of us in each one, and were

encouraged to become family units in a village, set "in the old days" (pre-Industrial Revolution). I appreciated O'Toole's attention to detail and his respect for the form, as he told us that with children, he would brainstorm with them the features of a pre-industrialised society. This is an essential step for drama in education, providing our students with the knowledge and context through which they can create their story. In other words, "becoming the people in the story – rather than enacting the story", as the facilitator skilfully stated when explaining what process drama is. "This is one of the many benefits of drama", I thought to myself: "the experiential learning stemming from living-through a different era!"

Each group was to decide i) each one's roles within the family unit; ii) our family trade; iii) why this was to be a celebratory day. Hence, dramatic *roles* and *situation*. An important point here: the teacher did not assign roles and situation; we had to create them. He didn't do the work for us. We had to do it. Would we rise to the challenge?

At this point in the workshop, I found myself sitting in a circle with six other people who I didn't know. We were all trying to negotiate, verbally, our status in the family unit. "Who wants to be the grandfather? Who wants to be the son?" A lot of hesitation, some awkward silences. Here, we entered new terrain, as group dynamics came into play to mediate personalities and power differentials.

As is my habit, I craved a low-status role – the child, rather than the higher status of the elderly grandmother. "What is it with me and status?", I wondered. I dislike high-status roles, I am more attracted to low-status roles. I was later reassured when O'Toole said that, in the convention of Teacher-in-Role, he also favoured low-status roles, as offering the teacher more flexibility and opportunities for characterisation, besides empowering children from the teacher's normal authority role.

Back to the group dynamics: it was very difficult for our group to negotiate these roles. Nobody wanted to take a stance and make a decision. I felt that leaving the role allocation to the group via a verbal negotiation was perhaps not the best way. Could this have been negotiated non-verbally? Yet, whichever way – verbal or non-verbal – it was important that we decided for ourselves, agency being at the core of process drama.

Time soon unearthed the group leader among us, a man from Turkey with a deep, clear voice. He would play the FATHER, he announced. Another participant volunteered to be the GRANDFATHER. I chose to play the CHILD. Once family roles were negotiated, we had to come up with a trade. Our self-assigned group leader suggested: "shoemakers". Someone else echoed: "That's what I was thinking, too!" We became the shoemakers.

FATHER had plenty of ideas about these shoes: "Our shoes are innovative, our shoes are special, our shoes... will not burn in the fire. Our shoes defeat fire! Our shoes are... are..." I gently intervened: "They are fireproof". He seemed elated to have found an English expression to encapsulate his idea. I thought to myself, "Wow, we heard in the pre-text that the magic goose threatens to destroy the town by burning it down, and this participant has orchestrated a strategy. A 'master playwright' talent, as Dunn (2011) describes it. How fascinating!

I cherished this moment, feeling proud of this Turkish speaker whose English was not developed enough to know how to say 'fireproof' but whose ingenuity and creativity overcame that. Here, thinking with my *teacher*'s hat on, with reference Bowell and Heap (2017)'s levels of intentionality, I made a note of the affordances of drama to acquire new language via meaning-making.

I was drawn to the fireproof features of the shoes, curious to see how this would affect the drama later on. However, the participant playing GRANDFATHER did not seem to like this, and vigorously blocked the idea: "No way. Our shoes are traditional, classic footwear!" Our shoe design could not be changed. In that instance, I found myself intervening to act as a mediator in the group, not just to reconcile ideas, but with a hidden agenda to infuse dramatic *tension*. I suggested we breed an inner conflict in the family, the old generation wanting to keep with the traditional shoe design, and the new generation wanting to launch a new product: fire-resistant shoes. This could be the focus of our celebration: the handover between the old and new generation. The launch of a new line of fireproof shoes. GRANDFATHER conceded he would take a step back.

I was delighted that my intervention diffused the controversy and managed to turn it into a source of *tension of relationship* between the family members. Here, I was thinking with my *playwright* hat on, another level of intentionality in process drama QT (Bowell & Heap, 2017).

9. Next, we had to embody the scene. I didn't want to over-direct, so I became withdrawn. There was one aspect, however, I decisively insisted on, holding on to my *director*'s hat, following Bowell and Heap's (2017) QT. This was related to dramatic *focus,* in terms of framing the action: I insisted we use two chairs, facing each other, to delineate the space and function as a sign to denote a table display. GRANDFATHER and GRANDMOTHER sat down a metre behind the display, watching the activity unfold. FATHER and MOTHER stood behind the table display, neatly arranging imaginary shoes along the surface of the chairs. The three children (including me) worked hard to attract customers, running to/from the display, knocking on imaginary doors to invite people to see this new product. The two chairs, as simple as they were, helped us to focus the space and to engage in the make-believe.

   This sequence allowed us to: a) effectively negotiate our own *roles* and *situation* in our own family unit, and b) extend the make-believe to the other two groups, also family units – knocking on their doors, attracting them to the display to see our father's shoes. When I managed to capture a villager's attention, FATHER would do a demonstration with the live flame from his lighter, beaming a smile at his new product.

   I noted how quickly FATHER appropriated the term 'fireproof' in his demonstrations with the lighter to other villagers. He came across as eloquent, confident to brag about the shoes using an adjective he had just learnt and that, I suspect, he will not forget. This is an example of embodying language in action (Piazzoli, 2018), as engagement with the dramatic context enabled this participant to incorporate real elements into the imaginative sphere, generating an impulse for language.

   At this point in the drama, I thought to myself: "This is it. We are effectively inhabiting the dramatic world of the pre-text, we have created our own meaning, we have played with *role*, *situation*, *tension*, *language*, *focus*, *movement*, *meaning*. To go back to my earlier question about negotiating group dynamics: yes, we rose to that challenge!" How did we get

there? By having clear guidelines on what roles and situation we had to create, within the overarching narrative of the pre-text, and by manipulating the elements to create meaning.

It now came to the performing phase of the **tableaux**, with each group instructed to choose one moment during the celebratory day. We all performed simultaneously, for one minute or so, and then group by group – unpacking the various scenes through the teacher-led convention known as **tap & talk**. Here, I noted teacher's emphasis was definitely not on the dramatic conventions, but on the meaning-making.

To culminate the performance phase of the tableaux, O'Toole gave us a signal to animate the scene: now the classroom effectively transformed into a bursting market square – with bakers, shoemakers and potters at work, all engaged in their celebratory day. He moved from group to group and asked us questions, so we all learnt about each other's roles. In role, I felt proud of my FATHER's talent and ingenuity in shoemaking. At this point, the drama was acquiring a sense of *internal coherence*, as Heathcote would put it, as it started to make sense for us as participants (in O'Neill, 2014).

10. New transition here, and to help us with it, another **movement sequence**. The teacher instructed us to move around the space with attention to locomotion, levels, dynamics. Again, in hindsight, I find this a most exciting discovery in effectively transitioning to the next step – and, crucially here, to shifting perspective. The final leg of the movement sequence was a group-formation task, which enabled us to form pairs.

11. The kaleidoscope shifted, and so did our perspectives. In pairs, we were asked to engage in a simultaneous **role play**, choosing between the Jade EMPEROR (A) and his MAID (B). I was relieved to hear those options; it made me feel safe to know I had a choice, and I instantly chose B, the MAID. It wasn't only a matter of preferring low-status roles: in this case, it was because I would not feel comfortable with high-status language register (in English) of the EMPEROR, I would be more at ease improvising with the language register of a MAID. As a language-anxiety-prone speaker, I appreciated the teacher giving us this choice.

The role play guidelines were clear: the EMPEROR, sitting in the palace, a highrise, was looking down from his window onto the main town square (*place*). However, he could not see very well (i.e., *constraint*) so the MAID had to tell him what was happening (*frame*). Thus, the MAID (*role*) would be 'the eyes' of the EMPEROR, describing the villagers' actions from the heights of the palace window. However, the more the MAID told him about the villagers, the more the EMPEROR would get irritated (generating *tension*). A clever device to add tension, I thought, and to possibly infuse dramatic irony. But then, the teacher put the cherry on the cake: it was not just any day in the village. It was the celebration day for the villagers, the day we had just performed in the previous step. This is where the vertical re-framing occurred.

I was intrigued by how the leader managed to regulate aesthetic distancing without manipulating the element of *time* (my usual go-to: "50 years later..."). Instead, we remained in the same dramatic time and re-adjusted frame through the verticality of *place* and *role*. I am using the term 'verticality' both in its literal and metaphorical sense, as we were told that the palace (*place*) was a tall building, hence we had to imagine looking down onto the square, and the status (an aspect of *role*) of the EMPEROR and MAID was higher than the status of the villagers in the square. Thus, I refer to this distancing strategy as 'vertical re-framing': distancing achieved by looking at the same situation, re-framed by a vertical shift in *place* and *role*.

It wasn't until I, as the MAID looking down to the square, started to describe the activity of the shoemakers, and in particular the children running from door to door to attract villagers to the shoe display, that I got emotionally invested. I started feeling the poetic resonance of vertical re-framing while I, in role as MAID, used third-person language to describe my previous role, SHOEMAKER's CHILD: "Your majesty, a child is running back/forth the shoemakers' display, she seems excited about something!". This was met with the EMPEROR's frowns, who cringed at the idea of a child's happiness. I tried, as MAID, to reason with the EMPEROR, but the more information I gave to convince him the shoemakers were good people, the more the EMPEROR would get irritated. Here, as MAID, but also as myself, I

thought that when interacting with narcissistic people, one cannot argue; whatever one says, it will be an occasion to breed contempt. So, I changed strategy.

After all, I knew from the pre-text that the MAID had a plan. Not all was lost. Yet, how frustrating to see a powerful tyrant dismiss and despise a family's efforts to provide shoes for fellow-villagers, and to quench the CHILD's enthusiasm. It was not fair! The EMPEROR was mean. This prompted me to connect with the FQ.

While all of this was going through my mind, my partner and I were improvising in our A/B role play. I heard myself utter these words, in my most courteous voice: "Your majesty, I see you are bothered. Do you have a headache?" A great moment here – and a moment of Brechtian alienation! We both chuckled: we of course knew, as ourselves, that the EMPEROR didn't have a headache. He was supposed to get irritated, it was the constraint given by the teacher – but in the flow of the improvisation this comment worked well, responding to the EMPEROR's frowns.

In hindsight, this is an example of *dramatic irony*. A text is ironic when the audience knows something that the characters do not. In the case of this improvisation, EMPEROR did not know about the MAID's plan. While there was no external audience, the *self-spectator*, or 'watcher in the head', functioned as audience to witness this moment. O'Neill (2006) suggests that when using dramatic irony, a message is transmitted in a manner that triggers a reinterpretation of meaning. What was I really doing, as MAID, with that punchline? In my comment "Do you have a headache?" I was playing with *subtext* as an ironic device. I was, effectively, feigning to be concerned for the EMPEROR's health, while plotting to save the villagers. I loved this moment!

Most of all I loved how, by weaving a touch of dramatic irony into our exchange, I managed to get out of my head and back into the dramatic action. The headache comment focused me back onto the here-now of the drama, rather than over-thinking about the structure, distancing and all the rest. This playful exchange was spoken with my *actor*'s hat on, with reference to Bowell and Heap's (2017) QT functions.

12. The kaleidoscope shifted again. The scene concluded sharply with a moment of imposed jarring theatre, as the participants playing EMPEROR were instructed as a chorus to swear their hatred for the town and vow to send the magic goose to destroy it. The violence of this ritual moment set up the next phase, where the leader guided us through another movement sequence. This time, rather than culminating in a clumping/grouping exercise, we ended up working individually to embody the FIRE-BREATHING GOOSE.

    Before commencing, the leader pointed out this would take longer in a different class and asked us to make an effort to imagine we were 7-year-old children, well-versed in pretend play. As the mother of a 6-year-old child, I was instantly able to connect with this kind of physicality. I felt *animated*. It started as a visualisation, supported by a dramatic narration of the creature's features. The leader called out: "Walk like a powerful goose" and again: "Breathe fire and walk around, until all is burnt". The scaffolding that had been embedded in the previous steps also helped. My first response was filled with playful affection, mimicking the way my daughter and I play together.

    But then, my engagement intensified. I went to a darker place. As I was embodying the FIRE-BREATHING GOOSE, spreading fire until all was burnt, I started to identify with the role. My flames were spreading across the land, burning terrain around me. I knew people would be burnt. But it did not matter. Burning my surroundings was my nature; it was the natural thing to do. I was not being mean; I was being myself, GOOSE, in my element – my majestic presence emanating fire that destroys all. I had no choice. That's who I was. It was others' responsibility to stay away from me. Should they need to come near me, they'd better think of ways of protecting themselves. "I am dangerously powerful" I was thinking, while breathing fire, "And I won't apologise".

    Bolton (1979) talks about 'raw' emotion and 'filtered' emotion, describing dramatic form as made up of the elements that regulate that interaction. In that moment, my raw and filtered emotions jarred. Feeling powerful was lethally mesmerising.

    Yet, soon enough, a new feeling started to emerge. Feeling lonely. Powerful, fierce, but lonely. I quickly dismissed this feeling, revelling in the (imaginary) flames now surrounding me – but it wouldn't leave me. So I went out of role, I tried

to reach out. Connect. I looked at the others in the room. We were all there, but we were alone, wrapped up in our own powerful, disruptive flames. I retrieved inwards: I felt even more disconnected from others. My desire to exercise power by burning everything around me became greater. This sense of egoistic grandeur became a refuge from the threat of loneliness. Through this level of identification, I established a *connection* beyond the drama. It helped me to get a glimpse into those individuals who revel in exercising power but 'burn the terrain around them'. Powerful, deluded, surrounded by crowds, but alone. It was moment of *heightened awareness*.

Animation, connection, heightened awareness – the golden triad in Bundy's (2003) construct of aesthetic engagement in process drama – contributed to a degree of *metaxis* as I flew around the imaginary village, breathing fire. At the end of the sequence, the teacher narrated that the goose had burnt the village down, then went back to its nest. At that time, I felt no sense of guilt. I was content with what I had done. What was an unnatural feeling for me, was perfectly natural for GOOSE.

The spectrum of emotions I experienced in this sequence was a masterly example of the kaleidoscopic nature of process drama: shifting role/place to experience the same situation from different angles, juxtaposing raw and filtered emotions.

13. It was all getting a bit intense in my head, and I was pleased to hear the teacher instruct us to make a lighthearted group tableau of the very same scene – a **collective sculpture** of the magic GOOSE. This worked well to completely restore the distancing back towards some level of detachment. We were all clumsily working towards creating the big goose. We were playful, goofy. I needed this.

    It was difficult to coordinate so many people, so I stepped out of the clump and looked from a few meters away. I noted the left wing was missing some feathers and positioned myself on that side. It felt so incredibly cozy to giggle with the other 'feathers' while collectively recreating the wing. How different from the previous step, when 20 fire-breathing creatures were caught up in their imaginaire.

    It was the same people, same space, same pre-text, even the same angle (GOOSE flying) and same person (me) with my baggage, my memories, my personality. But the affective current that engulfed me was so different: from isolation to

belonging. From power-over to power-within. What enabled this change in perspective? Was it the nature of the second task, which required creative collaboration towards a collective goal (i.e., recreating GOOSE through one sculpture)?

The leader called for a break. People left the room. I was shaken. I noticed other people could engage in chit chat, while I couldn't stop thinking about what happened. I needed to write. Those few minutes gave me time to jot down a few notes, like "powerful creature/wherever it goes, it burns terrain around it/ this is my nature/lonely" I also sketched a diagram of the vertical re-framing, and wrote: "Strong engagement; distancing built-in; as the MAID, I described the scene I just performed". In *The Process of Drama,* O'Toole (1992) defines *metaxis* as a kind of tension that implies a dissonance in the simultaneous management of the fictional context of the drama, and the real context of the participants. This is what I experienced during that moment. I felt moved; the drama had dislodged something visceral, which needed to be addressed through writing. I noted that, through the shift of perspectives, I felt like I experienced the 'verticality' of time: a temporal aspect of presence which I have often sensed during significant life events.

14. After the break, we resumed with a Teacher in Role (TiR). Imagine, the teacher suggested, we were back in town as villagers and later that day (i.e., dramatic *focus*) people get a visit from the emperor's MAID. In that role, the teacher gave us some new information: a) GOOSE only breathes fire when it is out of the cage, and b) music can hypnotise it.

    This was functional to the drama, so we could develop a plan. I liked how it was not MAID who rescues the villagers – but just gave some information to help them help themselves. Isn't this what teacher educators do?

    It was interesting to hear some of the participants ask TiR pertinent questions like: "How can we trust you?" and so on – comments he deliberately brushed off. Later, he attributed that to the focus of the drama not being on 'power', but 'loneliness'. In other words, the kind of tension he chose to feed was in line with the FQ. Note to self: When I lead a drama, I sometimes go astray, accepting offers for tension-builders which take me off-track. Not having a clear FQ can sometimes leave me on shaky grounds.

Interacting with the TiR, I tried to bring the situation back to the here-and-now of the drama, asking: "How many hours do we have?" In retrospect, with this comment I was trying to establish a sense of urgency, some *tension of the task*.

15. **Whole group improvisation**, with two groups: the cage makers and the sound-makers. The leader gave us the option of embodying the making of the cage, or working on the sound. I volunteered for the music-makers group. Being in a music school, there was a piano in the classroom. I was keen to include the piano, as music can create *mood* and *non-narrative tension*.

    I immediately turned to my team members. Can someone play the piano? Usually, there is a musician who can play. Not that day, though. Nobody could play the piano, so they suggested I should. I started to grow anxious. This was definitely out of my comfort zone! Yet, my desire to create mood was stronger than my self-consciousness as a pianist, so I sat down, and started banging on the keys, trying to play with dynamics, forte-piano, and rhythm. During the rehearsals for that scene, I improvised a melody that served as a baseline to generate mood, and accompany the others – engaged in chanting some hypnotising formula. I was proud. My moment of glory!

    Then, it came to the actual performing together with the other members of the group, and I panicked. What keys did I hit before? My heart was racing. I tried to improvise again, but nerves got the best of me, and the melody I played was dissonant, clumsy, offkey. I stuck to a diminuendo, but felt dissatisfied. My three seconds of glory as a pianist came crushing down. I shouldn't have dared to touch the piano, I was not good enough for that. I was mortified and ashamed. Here's one to add to my vast repertoire of failures, towards a phronesis of failure (Saxton, 2015). Indeed, as I returned to my seat, deflated, I realised that while I was utterly unable to come up with a suitable melody for that topical moment, it was dramatic *mood* I was after. Then, I thought that my failure, as shameful as it felt for me, was perhaps not so bad. The leader did not seem upset about it, and nor did the others, so I was able to move on.

16. Out of role, O'Toole reminded us that only half the job was done. The creature was caged, but we had to create an illusion so the emperor would be tricked into thinking the place was

in flames. Here, he provided some context about a visual arts activity, the **lantern-making activity** that would normally follow (if there was more time).

17. Once the goose was caged, the **TiR** as MAID returned to say the EMPEROR had smelled a rat: the town was not burnt out. However, he realised how mean he had been and wanted to make up for it. In order to find happiness himself, he was adamant to find out what was the villagers' secret for happiness.

    This unexpected twist to the quest for happiness resumed a pedagogy of hope, intending hope as an ontological need (Freire, 1994/2021). It was an empowering moment. What moved me here was thinking about the teachers and children that have engaged in this drama, and how this particular task set them back to considering: i) what makes them happy, so that they could ii) gift that to the EMPEROR, to then iii) make a difference in society. As Denzin (2007) says, commenting on Freire's pedagogy of hope: "Hope is the desire to dream, the desire to change, the desire to improve human experience" (p. 135). How empowering for children who experienced this drama to be given this task. Again, I thought, this is one of the affordances of drama.

18. Back in our original family units, we were to decide, **out of role**, on something that we would bring to the palace: our secret to happiness. Our ingenious FATHER was quick to generate a new idea: talking shoes! We all built on his suggestion: talking shoes that could act as a confidant to the EMPEROR; talking shoes that could show him the way into our community, to share a meal with us. While this was framed in the drama, at some level I felt we shared these values in real life, as our own secrets to happiness.

19. **TiR with participants in role**. The three family units, one by one, were to visit the palace to present their ideas of happiness. The scene was set up to signify as much ritual grandeur as possible in our small classroom.

    The teacher chose not to play EMPEROR, but to go in role as MAID. He carefully position a chair, draped with a Chinese scroll, to signify EMPEROR (Figure 1). I liked this choice; it gave the teacher more flexibility and added humour to the improvisation. It was hilarious to see the male teacher (in role as a female MAID) mediate between the (imagined)



Figure 1. Villagers presenting their ideas to the Emperor.

EMPEROR and the family members – leaning in to catch his whispers, to either reject/accept the gifts. This final role play assumed a *ritualised* aspect.

When our group, the shoemakers, came forward, FATHER presented the talking-shoes, the only gift the EMPEROR accepted. In role as DAUGHTER, I felt a sense of pride towards my family. The shoes had become a *symbol* of ingenuity, shielding us from danger (fireproof shoes) as well as a device to overcome loneliness (talking shoes).

Reflective Phase

20. **Final discussion**. The teacher allocated 15-20 minutes for this, which was an excellent choice. A participant suggested an alternative to the sequencing structure we had experienced, a comment in relation to the EMPEROR. It was illuminating to hear the way O'Toole diverted this participant's remark: "Yes, but if we went in that direction, it wouldn't be a drama about loneliness; it would be a drama about power!". This, he stressed, might of course be just as worthwhile, but was not in line with the FQ of the drama. Here, the leader's firm management showed me how to regulate the structure with a sense of integrity. This exchange reminded me of Dunn's (2016) description of the purpose of a FQ, that is, "helping to shape the action of the drama and the reflections that

> occur within and following it" (p. 134). I witnessed this as an example of teacher's best practice in relationship to structuring drama. The diversion from 'loneliness' to 'power' would have, indeed, changed the focus.
>
> I was eager to debrief, so I briefly shared my experience of feeling powerful yet lonely, as GOOSE, when the sense of egoistic grandeur became a refuge from the threat of loneliness. It was so dissonant from my own nature that I had to get it out of my system. I appreciated the teacher's spontaneous response to my comment, chuckling: "Oh, but you weren't supposed to get into role there!" I valued his sense of care – he intended to protect me 'into' emotion, in Bolton's (1986) terms. Yet, the intensity of that moment left its mark, and it was important to release it.
>
> As a final remark, a participant noted the paradox of exploring 'loneliness' through group collaboration. This created an open-ended flavour to the discussion, as we left the workshop with more questions than answers.

Postscript

The drama had a postscript for me later that day. I returned to my accommodation in Athens, and picked up my bedtime reading, *Braving the Wilderness*, by Brené Brown, to start a new chapter on – surprise, surprise, *loneliness*, where I read:

> The neuroscience researcher John Cacioppo, of the University of Chicago, has been studying loneliness for over 20 years. He defines loneliness as "perceived social isolation". At the heart of loneliness is the absence of meaningful social interaction. [...] He explains that as members of a social species, we don't derive strength from our rugged social individualism, but rather from our collective ability to plan, communicate and work together ... it's why we are wired for belonging. (2017, pp. 52–53)

My mind went straight to the final comment in the drama, the paradox of exploring loneliness through collaboration. I thought of the shoemaker's CHILD, knocking at the villagers' doors, so that everyone could see FATHER's fireproof design. Later, the same CHILD would rejoice as the EMPEROR chose the talking shoes to overcome his "perceived social isolation".

My mind also went to the MAID, who must have felt quite lonely in that palace, minding an egocentric EMPEROR who despised the community. My thoughts went to the strong sense of connection the MAID must have felt towards the community, so strong she risked her job (and life?) to warn the

villagers of the imminent danger – being wired for belonging. After all, when I asked, as MAID: "Your majesty, do you have a headache?" I was not only referring to a physical illness, but also to an ache of the soul.

Discussion

The reflection above has unearthed several threads: the educational affordance of drama to engage in experiential learning, as participants immersed themselves in a different historical era (pre-Industrial Revolution); the intercultural potential of drama to engage with other cultures, as participants learnt about a popular Chinese legend; the linguistic benefits of drama in fostering peer learning, as participants taught each other new vocabulary (e.g., fireproof) and practiced it in an authentic context, to co-construct meaning. The commentary also highlighted best practice in leading drama, as the facilitator encouraged participants to exercise agency in choosing status, roles and situations, while also providing clear direction in steering the focus of the drama in line with the Focus Question.

O'Neill describes process drama as a "thematic exploration, rather than an isolated or random skit" (in Taylor & Warner, 2006, p. 5). In this light, the 'Red Lanterns' process drama could be depicted as a thematic exploration of *loneliness*. In returning to the FQ, "What makes people do mean things? And how can we best deal with them?", there are no simple answers. Yet, as this paper has shown, engaging in reflection can act as a potent tool to process complex, controversial emotions, thriving in the contradiction between the emotions felt in drama and those normally experienced in the real domain.

Another thread unearthed by the commentary relates to the 'phronesis of failure' (Saxton, 2015). *Phronesis*, a Greek term referring to experiential wisdom in praxis, has been defined in a number of ways in the literature. Originally elaborated by Aristotle (1999/350 BCE), Eisner (2002) refers to it as the "wise practical reasoning in education" (p. 375) informing the feeling dimension of decision-making in teacher artistry. Saxton (2015) engages with *phronesis* in relation to failure, in order to "untie the complexity of the reflections" and "to understand how failure may work in professional growth" (p. 259). Hamilton and Pearson (2020) echo her point, reframing failure, flaws and imperfections as gifts.

Crucially, the reflective piece above has provided a range of examples of how manipulating distance can generate aesthetic engagement. In an effort to clarify this point, it may be useful to draw on Eriksson's model (2022), which positions distancing as three orientations: as *protection*, as an *aesthetic principle* and as a *poetic-pedagogical device*:

1. Distancing as Eriksson's first orientation, *protection*, is aimed at "safeguarding participants' actions from consequences of 'the real'" (Eriksson, 2022, p. 18). The reflective piece above shows how this was achieved through a series of strategies, including: the use of a legend (pre-text) to explore loneliness; the freedom to choose high/low status in role-taking (step

11); structuring episodes in such a way that identification is diffused, never too intense (collective sculpture, step 13); providing sufficient amount of time for the final discussion (step 20).

2. Distancing as Eriksson's second orientation, *aesthetic principle*, is related to awareness of fiction and form in drama. This was experienced as a spectrum of lived experiences, from being skeptical (step 6: "How can a fire-breathing magic goose hook *me*?"), to playful attention (step 12, embodied recollection of playing with her daughter) to experiencing power as "lethally mesmerising" and finally "egoistic grandeur as a refuge from the threat of loneliness". These currents culminated in degrees of metaxis, thriving in the contradiction between the emotions felt in drama and those normally experienced in the real domain.

3. Distancing as Eriksson's third orientation, *poetic-pedagogical device*, manifested in the way the leader structured the kaleidoscopic twists, through a careful planning of steps 10-13, when contemplating the same dramatic situation from multiple points of view. A further example of distancing as a *poetic* device may be found in the physicality of playing GOOSE, igniting Greene's state of wide-awakeness (step 7). Examples of distancing as a *pedagogical* device may be found in the discussion of the pre-Industrial Revolution (step 8) and in the final improvisation (step 18), which linked the EMPEROR's desire to discover happiness with Freire's (1994/2021) pedagogy of hope.

Thus, adopting the lens of Eriksson's framework, distancing in process drama may be described as a threefold operation that safeguards participants' emotions, acts as an aesthetic principle and functions as a poetic-pedagogical encounter to enable participants to co-create meaning.

Importantly, engaging in reflection allowed for the emergence of a novel term, 'vertical re-framing': the manipulation of aesthetic distance through a vertical re-orientation, within the same now-time of the drama, of the elements of 'place' and 'role'. Verticality was achieved both in a literal and metaphorical sense. Literal, as the participants imagined to move from ground level to a high palace, looking down at a previous version of themselves. Metaphorical, as the participants moved from playing a low-status role to a high-status role. The writer's experience, in particular, was playing the role of MAID, whose status was higher than the VILLAGERS', but lower than the EMPEROR's, thus effectively mediating between the two extremities of the vertical axis.

As the commentary reveals, a sophisticated calibration of distancing allowed the commentator to experience the verticality of time, described in step 12 as "a temporal aspect of presence which I have often sensed during significant life events". Thus, vertical re-framing enhanced the perceipient's aesthetic experience through a 'vertical' perception of time.

Discourse on temporal verticality has been explored, among others, by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1936/2016) who discusses the experience of vertical time as a discontinuous series of instances implying ruptures between levels of experience. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard (1958/2014) illustrates his phenomenology of imagination in relation to vertical time through the metaphor of the house, going from the 'irrationality of the cellar' to the 'rationality of the roof', and advocating for the liberating power of imagination operating along the vertical axis. With Bachelard (1932/2013), then, the percipient playing MAID gazing down on the square, seeing a previous version of herself as CHILD while managing the EMPEROR's narcissistic responses via the headache ploy, could be construed as a vertical moment, when "time no longer flows. It shoots up" (p. 106).

Interestingly, the verticality of time has also been studied by cognitive psychologists in relation to language and meaning-making. Beracci and Fabbri (2022), for example, conducted three experiments with Italian students to evaluate whether they experienced and represented time vertically in response to different temporal expressions, and found evidence of a vertical mapping of time representation. In an older study, Boroditsky (2001) tested speakers of Mandarin and English to discover that Mandarin speakers commonly describe time as vertical. While it is not possible to establish a connection between the verticality of time in language and the notion of 'vertical reframing' as it emerged in this dramatic encounter, it is worth noting that this structure is based on a Chinese legend, and was originally developed in collaboration with Chinese teachers, for Chinese school children.

At this point, it may be useful to revisit O'Neill (1995) who argues, drawing on Bolton (1979): "Participants are in a continual state of tension between representing an experience and being *in* an experience. Expression and representation are not separate, but one contains the other, and there is a subtle movement between the two modes (p. 118, original emphasis). In the reflection above, the awareness of the 'subtle movement' between the representatation mode and the experiencing mode was ignited by the percepient's self-spectator. It was the 'watcher in the head' who noticed a poetic rupture, along the vertical axis, while *experiencing* playing MAID gazing at the *representation* of an previously interpreted role – the shoemaker's CHILD. The tension described by O'Neill between 'representing and being in the experience' was harnessed through the headache's ploy, a strategy to placate the EMPEROR's temper in order to protect the CHILD.

This dynamic could be further contemplated from a psychoanalytic lens, as the inter-relational experience of mediating between a representation of the (inner) child and an egocentric, narcissistic individual is familiar to the author. However, as tempting as it may be to analyse the commentator's psyche, intruding any further would be ethically questionable, and certainly beyond the scope of the present paper. Knowing when and where to draw the line between drama as education and drama as therapy is an essential skill for drama educators.

Overall, this reflective commentary highlights the value of process drama participants attending to the self-spectator, Heathcote's 'watcher in the head', through written reflection. Indeed, the act of writing itself was crucial for the author, as it added a further layer of distancing.

Conclusion

This reflective practitioner piece has attempted to give a full-immersion description of one particular process drama workshop, designed and facilitated by John O'Toole, experienced by the writer as one of the participants.

The paper explored the nature of distancing in process drama – a poetic-pedagogical encounter where participants work within a story, interpreting multiple roles and contemplating complex issues from dissonant viewpoints, through creative collaboration. This dramatic encounter, integrated by layers of reflection, generated space for new meanings to emerge, including the paradox of exploring isolation through group artistry.

The body of the paper, written in a reflexive tone, offered a glimpse into a variety of aspects related to dramatic form, including negotiating group dynamics in and out of role, managing the elements of drama (Haseman & O'Toole, 2017), metaxis (O'Toole, 1992), Quadripartite Thinking (Bowell & Heap, 2017), the phronesis of failure (Saxton, 2015) and distancing (Eriksson, 2022). In particular, John O'Toole's strategy of manipulating distance through the elements of *place* and *role* has been described as vertical re-framing: distancing achieved by looking at the same situation, re-calibrated by a vertical shift. The notion of verticality was articulated as a framing device within the drama, and also invoked in a philosophical sense to indicate the perceipient's aesthetic experience of time as vertical presence – a discontinuous series of instances marked by ruptures between levels of experience (Bachelard, 1958/2014, 1936/2016).

Here, it is worth revisiting the ironic punchline, spoken by the MAID: "Your majesty, do you have a headache?" Talking about what he terms 'reflexive improvisation', Crossley (2021) argues: "Improvising actors are responding not only to one another in this process but also to themselves. Indeed, they are responding *as another* to themselves." (p. 79, original emphasis). Similarly, in the workshop described above, improvising actors responded *as another* to themselves. This process unfolded through a vertical re-orientation that activated different viewpoints. One example was the role of MAID, watching the CHILD showcase fireproof shoes to the villagers,

aware that EMPEROR was plotting to burn down the village, and trying to divert him by asking whether he had a headache – perhaps a reminder that tyranny can be challenged with ingenuity, irony and imagination.

In closing, how can the notion of vertical re-framing serve drama practitioners as they seek to facilitate critical reflection and support learning? How might students' engagement with vertical re-framing influence their own capacity for self-reflection and meaning-making? And, finally, what research methodologies could best capture the impact of vertical re-framing on both teaching and learning? These questions, emerging from a praxial exploration, are left to the reader, pointing towards new iterations of practice, theory, and research.

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APPENDIX

The Legend of the Festival of Red Lanterns (Pre-text to the drama)

This story happened a long, long time ago, but it is still brought to life every year with the Red Lanterns Festival in January – red, because that is the colour of fire, which is important in the story.

The Jade Emperor ruled over the heavens and all the people on earth, and he lived in a great palace in the sky. He had everything he wanted... but he had nobody to talk to, because nobody dared to speak to the Emperor unless he gave them special permission, and they were usually too frightened to speak anyway. So, the Emperor was very lonely. To amuse himself, he would look down from his palace window on the people below and watch them going about their business.

One day, he was looking down on the world, and he noticed how happy all the people were. The harvest was good, and they were celebrating and laughing and singing and dancing. He saw them all together with their friends and families, and it reminded him how he didn't have any friends or family. He was lonely, and his loneliness made him envious of the people. He didn't want them to have what he couldn't have.

He decided to send down his fearsome Magic Goose which breathed fire, to burn down the world and all the people. His kindly maidservant heard about this, and she hurried down to the world to warn the people. She told them that while the goose was caged it could not breathe flames (that's why the Emperor's palace had not burned down).

The people built a great cage, and they managed to invent a way to catch the goose and cage it as soon as it landed, and the world was saved. One of the people then proposed that everybody should make and display red lanterns, so that the Emperor would look down and think the world was burning and the goose had done its job. And that was the first Red Lanterns Festival. And after that, for some reason that we do not know, the Jade Emperor's envy of his happy people disappeared, and he even learned to be kinder.

Source: 'The Emperor and the Magic Goose' in O'Toole, J. & Dunn, J. (2020). *Pretending to Learn,* pp. 103-104.