TIE Does Not Only Teach Shoe Tying

“Criss Cross and go under the bridge. Then you got to pull it tight. Make a loop but keep a long tail. That is how to do it right. Then you take the other string, and you wrap it ‘round the loop. Pull it through the hole. Now you got the scoop.” Tying a shoe is very much like theatre: a very intricate process. Theatre is no longer just about the philosophy of entertaining for younger audiences, but it is about fixing a problem, teaching wrong versus right, or educating people about an issue that they would have never known before they saw a show. It is a method that many people working with children’s theatre need to become more familiar with: Theatre in Education. My main goal is to discover the history of TIE (Theatre-in-Education), how it is applied today, and apply and create a few sample projects.

History is a fundamental item in every culture and today’s society. TIE was originally a British concept developed in England in 1965 and it differs from traditional children’s theatre by pushing its main focus on curricular issues in school or social problems. The main goal is to “present thought-provoking content to young audiences for educational purposes rather than entertainment” (O’Toole vii). TIE wants to get children away from being amazed by lights, sets, and costumes and focus them on thinking and feeling about the topic after the show, like the issues that every child will deal with, and it seeks to add a creative and imaginative flair to theatre and learning. The first TIE company originated at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry. Belgrade’s goal was to get people out of their homes and “tie” them to their community by
providing a program that attempted to reach out to the children and bring the techniques and qualities of theatre into the classroom. Children’s theatre originally began in the early 1900’s to entertain children and families. Many children could be entertained by the storyline, along with the lights, sounds, and pretty costumes. The children paid attention to fantasy, not social issues or many other topics that TIE teaches. Perhaps the children might have looked a little more in-depth to the topic taught in the play. For example, they might have read more about the history of King Arthur after seeing *The Sword and the Stone*. The children only saw one side of the story and did not take a deeper look into the topic.

There are three basic steps to TIE. Each show is designed for the children’s needs and strengths, and this is the foundation of how each show is created. The second step is to create a play or act where the children can be actively involved. There are many ways of approaching this. The actors/teachers, also known as the instructors, might ask the children to participate as an acting role, make decisions to advance the story, or solve the problems confronted in the play. With this in mind, it really does require the instructors to be flexible and focused on the task at hand to accomplish and achieve their goal. The plays are typically designed so that every child can participate in them in some way, shape, or form. Most of the time the shows were designed for small learning audiences, typically one to two average classes totaling about forty children. The third and final step is that before the show, during, and after the show the actor/teacher teams are attentive to the topic. They may find the desire to hold some sort of preliminary workshop for and with the students. It is customary at the wrap up of the show to leave the children with some sort of follow-up work so they do not forget about the main purpose that the actor/teacher teams visit.
In John O’Toole’s book, *Theatre in Education: New Objectives for Theatre – New Techniques in Education*, he describes and shows three different examples that were preliminary ideas. I felt there was one excellent example as described in the following section. In the town of Northumbria, a multi-step process taught the kids about the history of the town. It was set up for the fifth/sixth grade level students and was done as a mystery. I remember at that age how interested I was in mysteries. After talking with many of my students in fifth and sixth grade at the Buchanan Center for the Arts, they told me how fascinated they were with mysteries and finding what will happen at the end. The actor/teacher team designed it so that each week they would unveil a level of the history of the town. Not only did the children get to participate in an exciting and wonderful experience; they were able to learn a lot about the town in which they lived. It also provided them with a sense of pride about where their town originated. That was one example that was developed in the 1960s. Since then, times have changed and so has TIE.

Life goes through many changes and we are then faced with the present and where it will take us next. TIE has grown, but most of the principles remain the same. Instead of just focusing on classrooms and children, TIE has expanded to many different ages. Many businesses have grown to use TIE. One show was done at a business to explore their new acquisition. They had just acquired a corn plant in order to expand their energy resources and many of the employees were not aware about the history and information pertaining to corn. They developed a show that took the employees to different parts of the businesses and applied tradition TIE traits to the show. Another place where TIE traditions have expanded is with the elderly. Many retirement homes use TIE. In a retirement home that specializes in Alzheimer’s, the actor/teacher team performed a show about the history and the highlights of the earlier years. They talked about TV, brought back swing dancing, did the traditional “Who’s on First” by Albert and Costello, and
talked about many other memorable moments. For a moment, many of the residents remembered tiny and specific moments from their lives. TIE has expanded to do much more than children’s theatre could ever do. In my last example, TIE touched a community that had nothing to help them and where able to provide them with a moment of normalcy that some may or may not remember for the rest of their lives. Even with children nowadays, there are many topics that typical fairy tales in children’s theatre cannot touch on which TIE can base their shows. TIE can approach 9/11, the war in Iraq, Drugs, AIDS, and many other controversial themes that children’s theatre cannot step out of the bounds to reach. Many times children’s theatre sticks within the guidelines of typical fantasy types and finds it difficult to leave the children with a long lasting impression. Throughout my childhood, I attended many plays and musicals specifically designed for children. One show I do remember followed the TIE guidelines. I saw it when I was in 8th grade, where we were given a show on how we are each an individual. It was something that every junior high student needs to hear. I still have the booklet that was left with us. It has a lot of poems in it about being independent from others.

Like the future, TIE holds many new possibilities and some new twists and turns. At this point in time, I feel that TIE will continue to become more and more of a popular teaching tool. My hope is that it will be as popular as children’s theatre and will become a household name in theatre departments across the country. I also believe that it will keep expanding; hopefully to be included as a regular and a more formal course at a majority of teaching institutions for education and theatre majors. As for the topics that will be covered, I do not know where the world might take us and we will only see in the future as soon as we experience the present. Before we can approach that point in time, we need to experience TIE for what it is truly worth.
TIE can not truly be conceived unless presented as a visual concept. When I first heard about TIE, I was extremely confused. It took me a while to understand what went into it and what the exact product was. Recently, I have designed shows to showcase major elements of TIE and different approaches to TIE.¹ Some of those ways is an anthology, which is a creative way to showcase many different approaches to theatre with excellent ties to education. Examples are storytelling, dramatic interpretation, and a conflict/resolution in the form of a “game.” The first story I designed is specifically for kindergartners. It is based off the idea of adjusting and going to school. The format is a musical. The show is staged in a round where the children will be involved in every element, including bringing a favorite toy for show and tell, and many other things. The actor/teacher team will come to the school ahead of time and go on a picnic with the kids. This picnic could be outside or inside and the theme could change according to the time of year. For example, the picnic could be at the local park with time left for the actor/teachers to play on the playground equipment with the kids, and another option for the picnic is to have the TIE team come along for the Teddy Bear Picnic that almost every kindergartner experiences. This gives the children the opportunity to get to know the actor/teacher team. When it comes time for the show, the children will already know the actor/teacher team and be able to respond to them in a better situation. As part of the follow-up program, we would leave the kids with coloring books with pictures about sharing and getting along with others. We would also include a follow up visit with them to create and work with them on a craft and participate in show and tell with them. This is quite different from a children’s theatre show. There is a show called How to Eat Like a Child that has stories about skipping school, getting a dog, and how to annoy your sister. It is a funny show for children, but it lacks child participation. The audience sits in the

¹ Every part of the project is located at the back of the binder in accordance to the order in which it is mentioned.
audience and does not have any opportunity to react or share with the actors their stories. After working with kids, even the littlest ones have great stories! TIE lets those stories be heard and talked about versus children’s theatre where the children sit in their seats and stare.

Another show I designed is a based off of a game called “Chutes and Ladders.” Its main purpose is to teach 4th and 5th graders about the trip across the United States via the Oregon Trail. Each person will be divided into a family and given a specific color to wear and some of the actor/teacher team members will be in the group acting as a family member, too. The rest of the actor/teacher team will be at various stations maybe at the water hole, helping people forge across the rivers, or at the local trading post. Since the children are older, there is not a lot of need to do pre-show work with the children. They will need to get the teacher’s notes on the topic to make sure that they cover everything that the teacher had planned to cover. This project will take place over two days and will last the entire two days of school. Once the project is over. The students will take home a study guide of information that they filled out during the course of their trip on the Oregon Trail, and receive extra information needed for their test on the subject. If this were children’s theatre, the children would find out about the Oregon Trail, but most likely, would not be involved in the show. I always found it easier as a child to learn about something to be involved in versus watching the show. Also, what are the chances of them walking away from it with a packet of information that they would be tested on? It is not very likely that they would, too. The children might not receive as much out of it as what they would with the actually being involved in a “game”-like show as they would be in a TIE show.

My last show is specifically for high school students. It is a different approach with TIE. It is based on storytelling. There would be many serious points to it, but at the same time, the TIE actor/teacher team would include quite a few hysterical moments. The purpose of the show
would be to create a performance that would inform high school students that they are experiencing many things like other teenagers and that they are not alone. As part of the pre-show work, they would issue a survey to the students for them to fill out, talk with high school teachers, and finally talk with their guidance counselors and social workers about problems the students are facing. Once they received some of the information, they would design the show in accordance to what was needed. To get the students involved, there would be an audience and they would pull a few students to participate in the play at a few of the humorous parts. Once the show was over, the students would receive a pamphlet/packet of the places where they could go for help and specific accounts of things that happened to the actor/teacher team when they were in high school. They would also be given the actor/teacher team members, counselors, and social workers main number in case they felt that the only ones they could be talk to about problems or questions. In a typical children’s theatre show, they might see a show about one person’s or a group of kid’s struggles. It would be a biased opinion versus one that would be selected by everyone’s input. Also, they might not be able to identify themselves with the show about one or a few kids’ struggles. Most likely, they could identify with the ones in the TIE show because it would be directly pulled from many of their experiences.

TIE is a new and fresh look on theatre! It stands out above children’s theatre by designing shows equipped to the children’s needs, involving them, and leaving them with excellent information to help them out.
Bibliography


