

March 22, 2010

Hi Everybody,

For the last couple of months we've been working on some plays. The first of these "The Farm Concert" is from a short story about some barn yard animals who keep a farmer from sleep until he complains and they tone it down. We choose it as a beginning piece because of its simplicity and clarity and also because pretending animals has a broad appeal to children. Like a gym or board game, acting out plays in some respects, offers kids a more organized approach to fantasy play with rules and guidelines to follow.

The social securities are enormous. Consider how frightening it is for most kids to enter a game of imaginative play already in progress, where other kids have established a loose but to them familiar format and the rules change on a whim. Plays offer a window to imaginary play with consistent structure and a format that can still afford flexibility, problem solving, and creativity. So, to begin, The Farm Concert includes six animal roles; cow, pig, frog, sheep, dog, duck and one human, the farmer. The animal characters each make their animal sound loud and soft and for the most part in company of one another [there's courage in numbers]. For the developing ham actor there is the role of the farmer with two short lines.

Once we have read the story, we explain to kids that they can sign up for a turn to be in the play. Even though we have been using various sign-up lists all year this is a difficult concept to grasp. Usually there is pandemonium as kids start to shout out which part they want and often if it is the same part someone else is calling, heated arguments ensue. "No, I am the dog!" "No, I am the dog!" "No, I am" – and so on and so forth. Even after the list has filled up and we have reassured that turns will go on for many days, there are still disgruntled parties muttering "But I was gonna sign up for that part." And still later as we are reading the list to assemble the cast, kids who have not signed up continue to assert their right to a role. But later rather than sooner it slowly starts to sink in for everyone.

We perform the plays on the block rug and we ask the audience to sit on the tile facing the windows. The actors are seated off of the rug on chairs so they can make an entrance. We hope that the story will become familiar enough that the actors will keep the action moving without a lot of prompts, but the individual levels of investment and focus are so broad that often the people onstage and off can't resist coaching. Many kids get shy or tongue tied when their turn arrives and lots just get distracted watching what's happening.

After The Farm Concert we introduced a story called Mrs. Wishy Washy. This one concerns three farm animals cow, pig, duck who love to play in the mud and Mrs. Wishy who comes to wash them. For this play we made a simple tub out of four blocks and added a scrub brush for a prop. The animal's roles now included one line of dialogue, "Oh lovely mud." Mrs. Wishy's role included an entrance, an exit and three lines.

Presently we are acting out a story about The Three Billy Goats Gruff. Three brother goats, little, middle, and big yearn to cross the bridge to a grassy meadow, but under the bridge lives a mean and hungry troll. The three billy goats figure out a way to trick the troll. They cross one at a time, little one first, then middle each one putting the troll off with promise of a meatier goat until the biggest one arrives to challenge and push the troll off the bridge. We added some flowers to suggest a meadow, and a simple bridge made of three blocks. So far a teacher has done these jobs but soon they will pass on to kids.

This play has quite a bit of dialogue for all four of the actors and many of the kids have added character voices to their parts. The audience members have become sticklers for line precision so if the troll says, "Oh well, go on then." instead of the original "Well then, be off with you." loud corrections follow.

So far, the interest has not flagged and almost everyone is interested in having multiple turns, so we'll continue our exploration of plays.

Melinda and Joseph