

Obituary for John Airs

11th March 1941 – 20th August 2022

by

Brian Woolland

I first met John at a drama course in 1985. He and Chris Ball had recently started working together as drama advisory teachers in Liverpool, and I had recently been appointed as a lecturer in drama at what was then Bulmershe College, and which later became a part of the University of Reading. I warmed to John immediately. He took part in the work of the group with great insight and generosity. Those are qualities he brought to his drama teaching and to all his dealings with people. We developed a friendship which grew ever stronger over time. From very early in that friendship I appreciated that John was a profoundly good man, a man of the greatest integrity.

We worked together on several occasions – all of them richly rewarding and stimulating. I invited John and Chris to run an extended weekend workshop for PGCE and B.Ed students at Reading University. They returned the invitation, and I spent several hugely enjoyable weeks working with them in Liverpool – in schools and with teachers on courses. There is a stereotypical image of drama teachers being extrovert, loud and performative. John was none of those. He brought a fierce intelligence to all his work, and when leading a session, he was quietly reflective and thoughtful, which was strangely liberating and, in its way, quite inspirational. I don't think he ever really knew quite how influential he was.

Before John and Chris started working together, John had taught English and Drama and at Quarry Bank School, Liverpool (which was renamed Calderstones Comprehensive), where he soon took on responsibility for drama. While a student at Edinburgh University and a member of DramSoc he acted in and directed numerous plays. In Liverpool, he directed for Neptune Theatre (now renovated and renamed The Epstein), which was where he and Chris Ball met. Students he taught at Quarry Bank included Jude Kelly, Les Dennis and Clive Barker and numerous others who openly acknowledge how inspirational John was for them. I

witnessed this at first hand when with John in Liverpool. I lost count of the number of times people said to John with beaming smiles, ‘Oh, Mr Airs. You taught me...’

When Liverpool Education Authority set up an advisory team for drama, it was to be for just one year but was then extended to two years. John and Chris set about the work wholeheartedly, and the work was seen to be so effective that their contracts were extended further, and they worked together as a team for more than ten years. Everything they did together was truly collaborative.

They worked with children of all ages in nurseries and schools, they ran courses for teachers in Liverpool, they led workshops for NATD, they wrote books about teaching drama, they wrote plays. In 1987, one of these, a radio play, *The Speaking Clock*, won a Sony Award for best children’s radio programme. Their books included *Speaking, Listening and Drama: KS2 Years 3-4*, *Key Ideas in Drama* and *Drama Guidelines* (not to be confused with the London Drama publication), which was subsequently republished by Heinemann USA as *Taking Time to Act*. They were valuable resources. It was, however, their large-scale immersive projects that John looked back at and spoke of with greatest pride and pleasure in the years of his retirement. These projects involved children and teachers from several different schools (including special schools) and sometimes students in higher education. The dramas took place in castles, museums, cathedrals, quarries and parks. They usually involved well over 60 pupils from a range of settings, professional actors and 20-30 teachers. Over the years, organists, falconers, composers, film directors, camera operators and television companies participated in these projects, often volunteering their time and expertise. Schools and universities recognised that these exciting pieces were not only a focal point and stimulus for drama work but also for history, PSHCE, geography, literacy, maths etc. The drama would last for as long as 4 hours, and always the children made key decisions about the course of the narrative and reflected on the characters and the unfolding story. Articles about these projects appeared in the Times Educational Supplement, and some were documented by the BBC.

Sadly, I didn’t personally take part in or witness the giant dinosaurs (puppets) being unloaded from a police horse box into an enormous quarry in Runcorn where children from Liverpool special schools would devise strategies to protect them from Major Killthelot (also a large Welfare State style puppet) and from a vantage point overlooking the quarry would relay

information on the quest via walkie talkie to fellow pupils below. Nor did I participate in the search for Quasimodo and Esmerelda in the Anglican cathedral, or the projects in Calderstones Park or Chester Cathedral. But I know from talking with John and others who took part that this was the kind of work which really does change lives, and that it was cross-curricular in the fullest sense – in that it enabled all those taking part to see that what really matters in education, as in life, is our collective humanity, not small, restrictive labels; and that what we do in one area always affects others.

After taking advantage of a pension enhancement scheme, John became a freelance education consultant, working with lecturers and students at John Moores University, Liverpool Hope University, Edge Hill University, and LIPA. He was made an Honorary research fellow at Liverpool University.

John was a long-term member of NATD, serving on the National Executive Committee and on the editorial board of *The Journal* – where he was as rigorous, insightful and supportive of others as he was in his practical drama work.

John was a true socialist, who believed wholeheartedly in the benefits of collaboration, and in the power of the collective – which was evidenced in his approach to educational drama, where everything he did demonstrated that respect for the learners and their emotional safety was essential if true learning is to take place. His socialism was driven by a deep sense of the need for fairness and humanity. That was why he also espoused so wholeheartedly the Palestinian cause and was an active member of Liverpool Friends of Palestine, with whom he visited the West Bank village of Bil'in. He also worked with teachers (most of them from Palestine) at one of the Al Qattan summer schools in Jordan. Several years later, I led workshops at the same summer school. I found it remarkable (but not surprising) how fondly he was remembered by all who'd worked with him.

And despite always being firm in his deeply held values and convictions, he brought genuine humility to his dealings with others.

I stayed with John and Jane on numerous occasions and was always welcomed with such warmth and generosity. Because of the distance involved in travelling, we did not see each other as often as I would have liked. But it was a friendship which grew in depth and

strength. There have been numerous times when I sought his professional advice; and just as many when I felt enriched by his company, his sense of humour and his intelligence. I already miss him greatly, as I am sure do all who knew him.

John is survived by Jane (they would have celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary next year), Robbie (John's stepson), their son Jamie, and two adored (and adoring) grandchildren, Jack and Molly.

John Airs died in the Marie Curie Hospice, Liverpool, in the early hours of 20th August 2022 after a long struggle with cancer.

Brian Woolland
September 2022

With many thanks to Chris Ball and Jane Airs for their help and advice in writing this.