

# The **JOURNAL** for **DRAMA** in **EDUCATION**

Volume 38, Issue 1  
Autumn 2023  
ISSN 1476 – 9395

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Charity Number 1135457

# What's going on? From narrative fiction to Process Drama

by Brian Woolland

## Introduction

This article starts by considering the differences between narrative fiction, theatre and Process Drama. It goes on to explore the thinking that underpins planning for a Process Drama using the stimulus of a historical novel, but which encourages and enables participants to make key decisions and explore the consequences and implications of those decisions.

## Background

When my novel, *The Invisible Exchange*<sup>1</sup>, was published in July 2022, I was asked why write it as a novel rather than as a play? The simple answer was that there were far too many characters for a play, and I didn't think I could get a large cast play staged. But the question provoked me to reflect on the difference between writing plays and writing a novel, and also whether the material I'd discovered in researching the historical, political and social background to the novel could provide the starting point for a Process Drama with young people. The novel did, after all, have its origins in theatre, and my research for the novel revealed a viciously repressive misogynist culture which resonates all too strongly with many of the cultural influences to which young people are subjected today.

Bear with me while I offer some background information about the source material, and I hope you will see why I found it so intriguing. Contemporary events are often alluded to in plays of the early 17th Century. Aspects of Frances Howard's extraordinary story appear (albeit thinly disguised) in several plays of the period – perhaps most notably those by Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton and John Webster<sup>2</sup>. Frances Howard was the daughter of Lord Thomas Howard (Earl of Suffolk). In 1604, at the age of fourteen, she was married to Robert Devereux, 3rd Earl of Essex, who was about six months younger than her. The arranged marriage was intended as a political reconciliation between two immensely powerful families. But the marriage was a disaster. Despite his inability (or unwillingness) to consummate the marriage, Essex became intensely jealous of his wife's popularity at court, and he insisted she leave London and live at Chartley Manor, his moated manor house in Staffordshire, where Mary Queen of Scots had been held under house arrest immediately prior to her execution. Frances was there for much of the summer and early autumn of 1611.

On 25th September 1613, her marriage was annulled, and thus she became the first Englishwoman to successfully seek her own divorce – but in a deeply misogynist society she paid a terrible price for her fierce intelligence and independent spirit. Two years after marrying her second husband (Viscount Rochester, formerly Robert Carr) she was accused of murdering Sir Thomas Overbury, who had been imprisoned in the Tower of London on a charge of treason. No evidence was produced at her trial which would stand up in a modern law court. The central argument against her was that she was a 'creature of the deed' – meaning that if she had the temerity to transgress from society's norms by initiating her own divorce proceedings, then she must be capable of murder.

## Misogyny and marginalisation

The story fascinated me for numerous reasons. Frances's trial revealed so much – not only about misogyny, but also about corruption at the heart of the Stuart court. I was intrigued by the parallels with 'modern' times. Frances was treated as a femme fatale who was branded by her prosecutor as so evil that she wasn't allowed to defend herself at her trial, despite having to suffer a stream of damning but unproven accusations and malicious libels.

Sir Thomas Overbury's death could actually have been caused by poisoning from the mercury administered to him by the king's surgeon, but it resulted in the execution of four 'small fishes'<sup>3</sup> and the imprisonment of Frances

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<sup>1</sup> *The Invisible Exchange* (Matador, 2022) is planned as the first of a trilogy. A subsequent volume is from the point of view of Alice, the Huguenot refugee, a significant, but not a major character in the first novel.

<sup>2</sup> There are several references to elements in Frances Howard's trial in Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*. It's been suggested that Vittoria Corombona in John Webster's *The White Devil* is a thinly disguised version of Frances Howard. *The Changeling* by Middleton and Rowley has references to the scandal that are so overt it's been seen as a theatrical re-imagining of it.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Turner, a close friend of Frances Howard, was one of those executed. She

and Rochester (by then they had become Earl and Countess of Somerset). Frances pleaded guilty to the charge of murder, though it seems likely that this was a kind of plea-bargaining because by then she had a daughter, and the family was allowed to live together in relative comfort in the Tower. That in itself is very strange, for if they had been genuinely guilty of murder they would almost certainly have been executed. After seven years in the Tower, however, they were pardoned by King James, and released.

All of this intrigued me, but although historians are still puzzled about who and what really killed Sir Thomas Overbury, I wasn't interested in writing a murder mystery. I wanted to explore how corruption at the highest levels of society affects those who are normally marginalised by history: the servants, the fixers, the prostitutes and courtesans, the street traders, the bit-part players. The central characters in *The Invisible Exchange* are Matthew (a fixer and a rogue), Alice (a refugee from Huguenot persecution), Frances Howard, Kate (her personal maid) and Hannah (a 'cunning woman,' treated by some as a witch and a madwoman). Although Frances Howard was a wealthy aristocrat, she was marginalised by the Jacobean 'justice' system and indeed by historians until very recently. I was interested in the way the story exposed the ways that institutionalised misogyny vilified and silenced her<sup>4</sup>. I wrote a draft of the novel in which the story was told predominantly from her point of view, but found that didn't enable me to reveal the mechanisms of that misogyny, nor the ways in which the repression of women reveal profound fears of female power and sexuality.

### **Theatrical tradition, characters' journeys and Process Drama**

The character of Matthew Edgworth draws on the tradition of those Jacobean malcontents such as Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Flamino in *The White Devil*, De Flores in *The Changeling* and Edmund in *King Lear*. The overweening ambition and ruthless cunning that Matthew inherits from his dramatic ancestors drives the novel's plot, but it also gives him access to the palaces and grand houses of the aristocracy, as well as the murky underworld of Jacobean London – the taverns, the gambling dens, the brothels and the prisons. At the outset of the novel he exploits and objectifies women, but the journey he undertakes confronts him with situations which force him to rethink and change his attitudes. That notion of a character's *journey* is central to certain models of how dramatic fictions work. But crucially it involves the writer (the playwright, screenwriter or novelist) putting characters in situations which force them to reflect on their attitudes and ideology. However much agency you give your characters, you (the writer) have to use the narrative to make what might have once seemed easy choices for the character into difficult choices with significant and often uncomfortable consequences. In a well-constructed novel, character development and narrative structure are closely intertwined. A key difference between this and educational Process Drama is that although the teacher functions like the writer in deciding on the starting point, the participants make their own choices and decisions with appropriate help and guidance from the teacher, but not the kind of guidance that takes agency away from them. That is why it is so important not to plan the narrative development. Much of the learning in Process Drama is found in exploring the consequences and implications of decisions made by the participants themselves, and through guided reflection on those choices.

### **The starting point for a novel and planning for drama**

While researching the background for the novel that became *The Invisible Exchange* I came across contemporary pamphlets which referred to persistent rumours that Frances was seen in and around London during the period when her husband had her kept under virtual house arrest at his mouldering manor house in Staffordshire. There is no evidence in the historical records that she was spirited out of Chartley, but for me it provoked 'the big suppose' that gave me the starting point for the novel that became *The Invisible Exchange*. In effect I was asking myself 'What's going on here?'

But that particular starting point – the disconnect between the rumours and the recorded history – wouldn't work for a drama – not least because it's only resonant and meaningful if you have appropriate prior knowledge of the historical, social and political context. I don't want to slip into the position where I take control of the narrative, placing me, as the teacher, in a position of intimidating dominance which would inhibit the participants.

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coined the memorable phrase that she had been 'caught in a net for small fishes', strongly implying that bigger fish would walk free. Lucy Jago's novel *A Net for Small Fishes* (Bloomsbury, 2021) tells the Frances Howard story from Anne Turner's point of view.

<sup>4</sup> David Lindley's *The Trials of Frances Howard* (Routledge, 1993), offers a closely argued and rigorously researched analysis of this institutionalised misogyny.

In *The Drama of History*, recently republished by NATD in *The Journal*<sup>5</sup>, John Fines and Ray Verrier suggest that any planning process must start with detailed observation of the class and analysis of its needs: their interests, their strengths and weaknesses. For example, do they co-operate well? Do individuals tolerate and support views which contrast with their own? Do they resist or embrace new challenges?

### **Observing a group and allowing them to reveal their interests**

As I'm not attached to a school or an institution, the nature of my own recent work is usually with groups I've not met before. Simply asking them what their interests are is likely to elicit responses which individuals think others (their peers and/or teachers) might want to hear. I therefore usually start with a fairly open-ended improvisation exercise – always pitched at a level within their comfort levels – which gives the participants opportunities to explore their own interests without being seen to put themselves on the line. It's a way of easing them into the work, but also gives me an opportunity to observe closely and get a sense of what their interests are. An example from working in Winchester Prison with men who had little or no previous experience of any kind of drama. I start by asking for a volunteer to sit in a chair, and then for a second volunteer to stand about a metre away. I ask both volunteers not to 'act' nor show expression. I ask, 'Who are these people?' After the inevitable jokes and evasions, a dramatic situation slowly develops. Someone suggests the seated man is waiting in a doctor's surgery. After further questions, it's agreed that he's waiting for his girlfriend who has had an appointment with the doctor to discuss her pregnancy. The standing man is the doctor who's about to call the seated man through. As this is an all-male environment, I offer to play the girlfriend. There are a few ribald comments, but I take the role seriously, and the men clearly want to as well. Bit by bit we bring the situation to life. What is each person thinking? What concerns them? What does each person say? Gradually, line by line we develop the scene until the two volunteers feel confident enough to improvise, using some of the techniques of Forum Theatre (where they can ask the 'audience' for advice) and take the scene a little further.

We repeat the exercise. This time, it's decided that the man standing behind is threatening the man sitting down. I ask where they are? Why is he threatening? What's at stake? And why does he stay sitting down when he's being threatened? Initially they want to develop the situation into their own version of a kind of knockabout gangster movie, in which the threat emerges from a drug debt. But by taking each suggestion seriously, and showing that I am willing to work with their ideas, then gently delving a little deeper I get a very strong sense that they want to work on a drama about peer group pressure, and to explore ways of resisting it. In essence, the simple exercise involves presenting the group with material that engages them, then asking, '*What's going on here?*' As they gained experience in drama, they undertook some remarkable, sensitive work about absent fathers. And the culmination of the workshops on peer group pressure was the production of the play, *Stand or Fall*.

### **The Frances Howard story and planning for drama**

We sometimes approach material through drama that the participants already have some knowledge of: working on a novel or a play (for example) that students might be studying elsewhere in the curriculum. At other times we might use drama as a way of introducing the material. In this instance I am assuming that the participants in the drama have no prior knowledge of *The Invisible Exchange*, nor of the historical period in which it is set; and that the participants aren't going to be reading the novel. I'd be using the material to explore issues of misogyny and male power, but in a way that uses the framework of an historical drama to create a critical distance from the misogyny they experience in their own lives through social media and exposure to the hateful diatribes of the likes of Andrew Tate.

As this article is not about teaching a specific group, it's not appropriate to set out a detailed scheme of work, but I will suggest a possible starting point with brief notes about how it might be developed from there. With any group, I'd start by using an exercise such as the one described above, giving the group a chance to get used to me and easing them into the work, and allowing me to get a sense of them and where their specific interests in the material might lie.

### **A possible starting point**

We start by looking at an edited version of the actual indictment of Frances Howard from her trial for murder, presented to the participants in the form of a document made to look as if on parchment. It includes this astonishing statement by the prosecutor, Sir Edward Coke:

*You are a whore, a bawd, a sorcerer, a witch ... and a murderer ... You are the creature of the deed.*  
(The implication is that if Frances was capable of divorcing her husband she must be capable of murder).

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<sup>5</sup> *The Journal*, Volume 28, Issue 1 (Spring 2012) through to Volume 30, issue 1 (Spring 2014).

We examine the document carefully. Participants are encouraged to ask questions. And I ask them questions. Essentially, *What do you think is going on here?*

As they request it, I provide information in written and pictorial form – including images of Westminster Hall, where the trial took place. But I'm careful not to intimidate with facts and information.

Together we set up a physical representation of the court – using actual descriptions (with modernised language where appropriate), which clearly imply it was a highly theatrical occasion at which people paid huge sums to watch. It was effectively a show trial in which Frances was being made an example of.

I offer to take on the role of Sir Edward Coke, the prosecutor. The participants in the drama question Coke. We spend time preparing these questions, so that they can examine the attitudes and assumptions that underpin his accusations.

### **Historical inaccuracy**

When working on historical dramas, I've often been asked by teachers, 'What if they make decisions that are historically inaccurate?' Process Drama allows us to revisit specific moments, see what might happen when we do things differently. The methodology allows us to explore 'what ifs,' thereby questioning the notion that the status quo is inevitable. It actively shows us that the way things are is the product of specific decisions, and that things can be different. This is in itself empowering. Participants have a stake in their own learning, their contributions are seen to affect the drama.

When decisions are made that are anachronistic or take us away from the historical record we go with that, but at a later stage I'll seek opportunities to step back from the drama and ask, 'Would you like to find out what really happened?' This can provoke curiosity, leading to remarkably sophisticated research.

In this spirit, I suggest that the drama described above might now diverge from a re-enactment of the trial of Frances Howard and the attitudes and ideology it embodies. The participants have already had the opportunity to question Coke in a non-confrontational way, but maybe we use what we've learnt from that to set up the court in a way that they think is fairer. I might ask, for example: Who should be given a chance to speak? Who should be present? We might start by allowing Frances to defend herself (which she wasn't allowed to do at the time), and then explore how others might be affected by her trial – for example, her maid, or Frances's close friend Anne Turner, who in 'reality' was executed for her part in the alleged murder.

And so we proceed – sometimes enacting moments from the trial, sometimes using role play to unpick assumptions of misogyny and sexism, sometimes reconstructing events that led to the trial, sometimes creating the 'evidence' (much of it hearsay and gossip) that Coke insists is damning, and always finding ways to reflect on how this resonates for the participants and how the material relates to their world.