

“Where imagination becomes experience”: Celebrating the life and work of Cecily O’Neill

Conference Report

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This report reflects upon the 2026 conference Where Imagination Becomes Experience: Celebrating the Life and Work of Cecily O’Neill, held on July 25th and 26th in Trinity College Dublin in honour of Professor Cecily O’Neill’s 90th birthday. Carmel O’Sullivan was the Conference Director, supported by a large international conference organising team including Erika Piazzoli, Susan Kennedy Killian and Ciarán Treanor from Trinity. This report provides an overview of the two-day event from the perspective of the author who was in attendance. It outlines some of the insights shared during the keynote address and panel discussions and shares the aesthetic experience of attending the artistic performances and participating in Professor O’Neill’s workshop.

Keywords: Cecily O’Neill; celebration; Process Drama; Conference report

1 Introduction

On 25-26 July 2026, academics, artists, scholars and students gathered in Trinity College Dublin for a conference in celebration of Professor Cecily O’Neill’s 90th birthday. Having devoted over six decades of her life to teaching, writing, creating and mentoring, it felt fitting to honour one of Drama in Education’s most beloved pioneers with a weekend of shared research, workshops and performances. There was an air of camaraderie and celebration as we entered Dargan Theatre in the Trinity Business School on Saturday morning: old friends greeting each other after long absences, strangers bonding over their shared appreciation of Cecily O’Neill’s work.

We were warmly welcomed by the Conference Director, Professor Carmel O’Sullivan, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, on behalf of Trinity College Dublin, together with Elaine Clotworthy, Lecturer in Education at Marino Institute of Education, and Sinéad Ní Ghuidhir, Lecturer at the University of Galway, on behalf of the Association of Drama in Education in Ireland (ADEI). This welcome address was delivered in both Irish and English, a bilingual beginning to the weekend and a tribute to Cecily O’Neill’s Irish heritage.

2 Finding form

Cecily O'Neill began her keynote address, *Finding Form*, by asking the audience to call out where we were all from. As we shouted out our countries and continents, the room filled with smiles as it became clear that every inhabited continent was represented in the space. She welcomed us warmly, saying, "Wherever you came from, I know you brought your knowledge and your skill". Having drawn our attention to our diversity, O'Neill then focused on what united us: stories. She spoke of her love of Shakespeare, "I like a bit of blood!", and joked that since he stole from everybody, we shouldn't worry when we borrow from literature for our creative ideas. She reminded us that all stories boil down to either a journey or a homecoming and that the best stories are about identity and unity. She said that a rich story can be the perfect pretext for a Process Drama and to demonstrate her point, read aloud from *Would You Rather* by John Burningham, the children's book which inspired one of her most well-known process dramas, *The Haunted House*.¹ She reflected on the rhythm and formula of how stories begin: the familiar "Once upon a time" in English fairytales, "*Fado, fado* (long, long ago) in Irish myths, and asked us to share the traditional starting point for stories, myths and legends in our languages and cultures. People eagerly began to call out their versions of "Once upon a time" in Chinese, Hindi, Norwegian, Hungarian, Turkish and Italian. Cecily O'Neill warmly acknowledged the diversity of language and culture in the room.

Reflecting on her journey as a teacher and drama expert, O'Neill shared the fact that her initial interpretation of Teacher-in-Role was that she should 'boss people about', joking that she was very good at it. She spoke of how she gradually began to choose less authoritative roles as she found her own unique style of Process Drama, allowing her to step back and let the students lead the action while she responded. Smiling, she told us that her thought process nowadays is "If I'm still running the show after thirty minutes, it's not working. If it's not working, tell a story." She explained that in Process Drama, meaning is not imposed by the teacher, rather it grows and is shared as the drama develops in episodes. We start with ambiguity and uncertainty and gradually, collectively, a sense of recognition and understanding emerges.

In the discussion which followed her speech, Cecily O'Neill recalled how she used to direct the neighbourhood children in her own production of a play entitled *The Bathroom Door*. She shared her childhood love of books, her dream of becoming a ballet dancer, and her joy in discovering that teaching was never boring. The sadly recent passing of Gavin Bolton was acknowledged, and she was asked what key principles he had taught her. She told us of a time when Gavin Bolton had come to observe her teaching a lesson. With a wry smile, she recounted how smoothly the lesson had gone in her eyes and how smug she had felt when it

¹ Featured in *Drama Structures: A Practical Handbook for Teachers*, by Alan Lambert and Cecily O'Neill.

ended, only to have the wind knocked out of her sails when Bolton asked, “Where was the drama?” Reflecting upon the lesson through her mentor’s eyes, it suddenly dawned on her that, in her own words, “There wasn’t any!” As the audience laughed sympathetically (some of us no doubt recalling our own less than stellar first attempts at using drama). Cecily O’Neill explained that the entire lesson had been a series of games rather than a Process Drama. She acknowledged the importance of this moment in challenging her preconceptions about drama and expressed her deep gratitude for Gavin Bolton and for David Davis, whose writings she praised.

When another audience member asked her to share what she had learned from Dorothy Heathcote, Cecily O’Neill recalled that when she once asked Dorothy Heathcote if she ever considered a lesson to be a failure, the response was “No, I don’t, because you never know what has stuck with a student. Who am I to say that they have not learned something or taken something away from the experience?” O’Neill told us how this had resonated deeply with her, remarking that “We are all indebted to the people who came before”. I’m sure I was not alone in taking that moment to reflect upon the thread of legacy connecting Gavin Bolton and Dorothy Heathcote to Cecily O’Neill, to ourselves, and the responsibility we carry to ensure it passes onwards to future generations.

3 When is a shoe not a shoe? When it’s a pretext

When we took our seats to watch *The Date*, an example of pretext in action performed by Ciarán Treanor (actor, *No Drama Theatre*; Executive Officer, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences). There was a shoe sitting in the aisle right beside the row of chairs where I was sitting. My neighbours and I looked at it quizzically as we sat down, some people joking that someone had lost a shoe, others guessing it would be included in the performance we were about to watch. Like Chekov’s gun, we knew that a shoe once introduced, must be incorporated! It added a palpable sense of intrigue as we sat down to watch the show.

Told entirely through mime, the scene opened with Treanor’s character gradually waking up in his messy bedroom, showering and stretching. Background music and visuals built a faster tempo as he realised he was late and began to rush around the stage trying to get dressed. At this point, I suddenly remembered the shoe! I whispered excitedly to the person beside me, and we both waited eagerly for the moment when the shoe would come to us. As the performer shoved one shoe onto his foot and began frantically looking for the other, we waved and beckoned to tell him where it was – as if he hadn’t been the one to place it there in the first place! It was a beautiful moment of immersion, all of us giggling like children and smiling in satisfaction that the issue of the shoe had been resolved. Shoes securely in place, the soundtrack and visuals continued to heighten the tension, ticking clocks, traffic noises and

images like Esher's 'Relativity' reinforcing the sense of confusion and sensory overwhelm as our protagonist got lost in the city. We empathised with him as he suffered various mishaps of Chaplinesque absurdity, finally making his way to the restaurant for his date only to discover that she wasn't there. The scene ended with our hero sitting dishevelled and disheartened, clutching the bouquet he had brought for his mysterious date.

At this point, Carmel O'Sullivan, Professor in Education, and Susan Kennedy-Killian, Assistant Professor in Education, Trinity College Dublin, joined Treanor onstage to explain that this scene had originally been performed as the pretext for a process drama workshop *The Drama Detectives*, part of a Trinity College research project working with young people with Down Syndrome in conjunction with the Down Syndrome Centre, Dublin. They gave an overview of their project and told us what had happened next in the workshop: the young people decided that the date had been kidnapped and that they needed to rescue her. They went into role as police officers to find clues, interview suspects and solve the crime. Their story culminated in the date being rescued and the happy couple getting engaged. They informed us that many of the Trinity students who had participated in the project were present with us in the audience and invited them to stand up and identify themselves to an enthusiastic round of applause – a lovely acknowledgement of the younger generations forging new and interesting paths with drama in education.

4 Panel One: The use of pretext

Chaired by Adam Bethlenfalvy, Associate Professor at Karoli Gaspar University, Hungary, the first speaker of the first panel was playwright Susanne Colleary, Lecturer at the Atlantic Technological University, Sligo, who fittingly opened with the words "It's always hard to begin". She explained that O'Neill's work speaks to her most when she is searching for the ideal pretext to engage her audience. Colleary gave an evocative description of the opening scene of her most recent play, *Amelia*, and explained how that one scene sets the tone for the rest of the play by situating the audience in time, space and imagination. She quoted O'Neill, "Nothing comes from nothing", and shared how long before the play ever reaches the stage, she tries to find the right pretext when workshopping the play to get the action started, in her words, "the pre-pre-pretext" (I was reminded of the impact of the mysterious shoe).

Chris Lawrence, Editor of *Drama Research* and Coordinator of *London Drama*, was next to share his perspective, describing his experience as a participant in one of O'Neill's workshops, a crime scene Process Drama, and reflecting how he and the other participants were intrigued before the workshop even began because the title was "Blood is Compulsory!" (Some laughter

from the audience as we recalled O'Neill's keynote address and her comment about "liking a bit of blood"). Lawrence shared that when the group struggled with a particular drama episode relating to dreams, O'Neill immediately noticed their discomfort and gave them a new direction, providing a clear focus and protecting the learners within the drama. He credited her expertise and sense of care for the students, noting that a good pretext gets the drama started, but the facilitator must be present and alert to the needs of the learners to adapt where necessary.

Mette Bøe Lyngstad, Professor in Drama and Applied Theatre at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, spoke next presenting her use of visual art as pretext for Process Drama workshops with children and adults. She talked us through a moving example in which she explored themes of war and displacement with children through a drawing of families boarding a bus, inviting the students to imagine themselves as one of the characters, evoking their senses (what can you smell, hear, touch?) and considering where they are going and why. She highlighted the importance of a rich artwork to fire the imagination and showed some beautiful illustrations by the Norwegian artist Lisa Aisato (2019) that she had used in a workshop with women, explaining that as many of them were illiterate, it made sense to begin with a visual rather than literary pretext.

The fourth speaker was Jonathan Jones, Editor of *Arts Praxis* and Educational Theatre Program administrator, New York University, exploring the 'amygdala hijack': the moment when stress floods our brains with cortisol inducing a fight, flight or freeze response. He reminded us that this can easily happen within a drama context and that it is often necessary to introduce scaffolding to support learners. He explained how he had witnessed O'Neill scaffolding her participants in a drama which called for them to be in role as pets and their owners being interviewed on a talk show. Upon noticing their anxiety about how to physically portray the animals, O'Neill changed the location from a televised talk show to a radio play, deftly removing the source of stress and shifting the focus to the discussion rather than the physicality. Jones echoed Chris Lawrence in crediting O'Neill's ability to pick up subtle signals from the students and adjust accordingly.

Annie Ó Breacháin, Assistant Professor in Drama Education, Dublin City University, was the final speaker, sharing the challenges that come with trying to engage student teachers. She spoke of the need for a powerful pretext to introduce the dramatic world quickly and establish a sense of location, character and motivation. She introduced her most recent pretext, the graphic novelisation of *Lord of the Flies*, adapted by Aimee de Jongh (2024), and how she had gradually built the world with her students over the weeks. Sharing a story of how one of her students 'murdered' another in role, Ó Breacháin recognised this as a powerful moment of immersion for the individual, a previously unenthusiastic participant suddenly deeply invested

in the performance, a fact reinforced when she later overheard the student excitedly telling her friends how she had ‘murdered’ someone!

5 From old bean grows bak choy

After the lunch break, Yuk-Lan (Phoebe) Chan’s, Director of Chan’s *Applied Theatre Lab* (CATLab), performed an autobiographical solo piece about migration, identity, memory and self-discovery. She opened with her working in her small English garden at home in the UK, trying to figure out how to care for the English plants that were unfamiliar to her. With humour, whimsy, depth and melancholy, Chan’s evocative storytelling introduced us to her father, the eponymous “Old Bean”, recalling his journey from mainland China to Hong Kong. Represented by a hat, the artist embodied her father tenderly, body language subtly shifting and voice deepening as she spoke in his native Chinese, a screen behind her sharing the subtitles for us in English. The story then shifted to her own story of migration with her husband from Hong Kong to the UK, a sudden departure fraught with stress and worry as they hid their plans from loved ones for fear of being stopped by police. Chan deftly interwove the stories of her father’s migration and her own, reflecting that she finally understood why her father had remained silent when she and her siblings eagerly questioned him about his home. The line “We want to hear new stories, but often we are opening old wounds” powerfully reminded us that we are not entitled to the memories of others and that to be trusted with them is a gift. Singing her original song “True to my Name” (melody by Adrian Chow) from the perspective of the vegetable Bak Choy, Chan concluded her performance with a whimsical yet powerful metaphor for human resilience. Speaking as the sturdy little plant struggling to root itself in strange soil, she sang the words “It’s not easy growing up in an odd place”, a sentiment which resonated deeply with many of us in the audience. “From Old Bean Grows Bak Choy” was a deeply moving piece of theatre and in keeping with the panel discussion that followed, a reminder that powerful art can evoke strong emotional engagement in political and social issues through aesthetic experience.

6 Panel Two: aesthetic experience in Process Drama

Chaired by Paula Murphy, Assistant Professor at Dublin City University, the first speaker for Panel Two was Naoko Araki, Professor of English for Academic Purposes Program, Akita International University, Japan, who introduced us to “Ma a i” (間合い), the Japanese concept of valuing comfortable moments of silence in conversation. Araki explained that as she works with foreign language learners, there is often a high level of anxiety about speaking (the amygdala hack in action) and that the pressure to do so often blocks her learners from being able to be present and participate in class. She argued that Process Drama helps to

reconceptualise silence in communication, allowing the space necessary for her students to think, engage, and be fully immersed in the drama without the need to speak to be seen as present.

The next speaker, Tor-Helge Allern, Professor Emeritus in Drama Education and Applied Theatre at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, focused on the potential for aesthetic experience to enhance moral education, reflecting that our emotional response to an issue in art can often be stronger than our reaction to the same concept encountered in real life. He shared an example of a drama he had facilitated with his students to explore the experience of refugees. He introduced multiple roles to encourage the students to switch perspectives and experience different viewpoints, but some students resisted the role change because they identified so strongly with the role they had been experiencing. Allern concluded by saying that while he considers switching roles important for the development of empathy and critical thinking, even more important than being able to switch between perspectives is to be capable of acknowledging that they exist in the first place.

Brad Haseman, Professor Emeritus of Drama at Queensland University of Technology, spoke next, highlighting affect theory and the concept of ‘intensities’ which he defined as “pre-cognitive, pre-linguistic, bodily-relational forces which circulate between people before being captured by language or emotions” (Massumi, 2002). He contrasted the typical Western approach to an activity like sailing, using compasses, maps, technology, with the advice elderly Tongan sailors give when teaching the young to sail: “Feel the breeze on your cheek”. Haseman positioned affect and aesthetic as a continuum, encompassing the human ability to feel our way into the world which can be enhanced by Process Drama. He finished with a question for us to consider: “Will generative Artificial Intelligence ever incorporate aesthetic experiences and/or affect?”

The third speaker was Jonothan Neelands, Professor of Creative Education at The University of Warwick, who shared his personal journey of growing up in a theatre family, becoming an English teacher, and how seeing a videotape of one of O’Neill’s Process Dramas profoundly changed his life and set him on a course of working with drama in education. He reflected that aesthetic experiences are highly social, felt experiences which involve the whole body, and that in process drama, these moments are not accidental but carefully crafted. Neelands spoke of the need for meaningful drama encounters which allow participants to wrestle with values rather than search for predetermined answers, to develop a moral imagination through exploring values and viewpoints and not simply expressing them.

The final speaker on the panel was David Allen, Artistic Director of the Midland Actors Theatre, who acknowledged O’Neill as a talented storyteller in the Irish tradition, joking that while he

“shamelessly” copied her work, he could never copy her ability to weave a good story. He spoke about the aesthetic experience of having a main character in the drama who is “presently absent” (a Heathcote convention), for example, the character Frank Miller,² stating that this creates a shared sense of responsibility and connection for the participants. He gave several examples of these moments in dramas facilitated by Cecily O’Neill, lauding her creativity, warmth and humour. In conclusion, he quoted Wallace Stevens, “It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality”, a reminder that it is often through art and aesthetic experience that we make sense of the world around us.

7 Imagined Worlds: A documentary tribute

The first day of the conference concluded with the première screening of a documentary, *Imagined Worlds with Cecily O’Neill*, celebrating Professor Cecily O’Neill’s life and legacy. *Imagined Worlds* offers an intimate glimpse into O’Neill’s life, featuring interviews with family and friends and a walk down memory lane revisiting places where she once lived and worked. On screen, O’Neill reflects on her experiences with her signature humour and humility, always crediting the teachers, mentors and colleagues who inspired and supported her. The documentary was developed and produced by Vaishali Chakravarty and Shashwat Srivastava from *The Joy of Drama*, an independent drama-in-education organisation based in India which was founded in 2015 by Vaishali Chakravarty.

8 Framing the significance of Cecily O’Neill’s work in 2026

Sunday morning began as Saturday night had ended: with music. As we took our seats in the Dargan Theatre for the morning keynote address, Brian Edmiston, Professor of Drama in Education at Ohio State University, took to the stage playing the Irish flute, the gentle melody reminding us of the previous night’s singsong of O’Neill’s favourite music following the conference dinner. Suitably intrigued, we listened as Edmiston shared his experience of working with O’Neill, personal affection and professional respect shining through his storytelling. He told us of her skill in creating immersive drama worlds, contrasting it with one of his own early attempts at Process Drama. He tried to engage the students in a story about Robin Hood, but when he appeared in role as the messenger, a student immediately ‘shot’ him with an arrow and ‘killed’ him! The room erupted in sympathetic laughter as he recalled his panic in the moment: “What do you do with that? How do you keep control of the drama if you’re dead?!” Edmiston told us that when he shared this story with Cecily O’Neill, her advice was that upon being ‘shot’ as the messenger, she would immediately step aside (and

² As featured in *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama*, by Cecily O’Neill.

out of role) then gesture to the floor to indicate the imaginary slain messenger saying, “What are we going to do about the body?” He praised O’Neill’s quick thinking in being able to so quickly re-position her role, shifting the focus of the drama from the character to the action so that the story could move forward. He noted it as an example of sharing power with the participants without losing it oneself, a core element of O’Neill’s Process Drama.

Edmiston then told us of a more recent workshop he had facilitated around the topic of Irish mythology. As he spoke, he began to circulate the room, inviting audience members to volunteer their knowledge of Fionn, the Fianna and other Celtic legends. We called out excitedly as he elicited responses and suggestions, eventually asking us to stand up and mime or pose in actions that the warriors would be doing. Edmiston asked audience members, “What are you doing?” and we responded in character – I held a spear as a member of the Fianna and announced myself ready to go hunting. There were several time warnings during this activity as we had started a bit late, but when Edmiston asked us if he should stop, his band of Fianna warriors roared a unanimous “No!”. We were all deeply engaged, creating meaning together. When the session did end (much to our reluctance), Cecily O’Neill responded to Edmiston’s complimentary words with a heartfelt thanks for the support he and his family had shown her over the years.

9 Panel Three: modes of reflection, Process Drama and movement

Chaired by Katrine Heggstad, Assistant Professor at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Panel Three opened with Erika Piazzoli, Associate Professor in Arts Education at Trinity College Dublin, sharing an image of her office whiteboard packed with quotes, dates, arrows and illustrations, reflecting on the influence O’Neill on her own work with Process Drama over the years. Piazzoli told us how she had been amazed, fifteen years earlier, to learn that O’Neill did not plan a Process Drama from start to finish, planning only the first three episodes. She reflected how this freed the facilitator to follow the needs and interests of the learners, allowing student suggestions and choices to direct the course of the work once the drama was established, an approach she subsequently adopted herself. She also offered a debrief of her aesthetic engagement when attending O’Neill’s workshop *The Haunted House*, highlighting the role of dramatic tension and attunement.

Adam Cziboly, Professor at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, spoke next, addressing the importance of pretext within Process Drama and reminding us that popular culture can be a rich source of inspiration. He encouraged us to reflect on the vast range of choices available to us nowadays and shared a list he had compiled of movies and TV shows containing complex themes, moral issues and value systems which he suggested would engage and motivate young learners. He left us with a thought-provoking image of an AI robot

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playing sports alongside human students and invited us to consider the wide range of possible themes we could explore from that one image alone.

The third speaker, Iona Towler-Evans, National Trainer in Mantle of the Expert in the United Kingdom, engaged us with some powerful storytelling and spoke of the importance of distancing in drama. She discussed the use of time to create distance, situating stories deep in the past to explore themes such as power and loss that might otherwise be too raw to address. She spoke passionately of the rich cultural heritage that lies within folk tales, myths and legends and gave the example of the Irish myth of *Tir na n'Og*, bringing the tale to life for us with her evocative storytelling.

Jeffrey Tan, Theatre Director and Adjunct Assistant Professor at the National University of Singapore, spoke next, reiterating Towler-Evans' point about the importance of dramatic distancing and highlighting how it can support students to explore difficult questions from the safety of a drama world in which they feel protected. He reflected that drama can provide a safe place to explore ethical dilemmas, reinforcing the idea of developing morality through aesthetics as mentioned by Tor-Helge Allern during the previous day's panel. Finally, he offered a heartfelt thanks to O'Neill for creating such opportunities within her own drama and for generously sharing her time and expertise.

The final speaker of the panel, Robin Pascoe, Professor Emeritus at Murdoch University, and immediate past president of International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA), chose the framework of 'memory knots' to share his reflections, taking us on a journey through his personal timeline as an educator, each encounter with O'Neill and experience of her work creating a new knot of memory. Pascoe shared a quote of Cecily O'Neill's which had deeply resonated with him: "We learn drama by making drama. We learn to teach drama by teaching drama" and reflected on the necessity of learning through doing and being willing to take risks. He concluded by sharing some of his own writings on the transformational nature of drama, examining drama spaces as "spaces of becoming".

10 "Do what you must": the queen and the rebels

The afternoon continued with a Process Drama workshop led by Cecily O'Neill, clearly undaunted by the huge number of participants as all eighty-six of us filed around the edges of the room. We began with a warmup led by Dan O'Neill (movement director, choreographer and Cecily O'Neill's son) moving mindfully with our breath and letting ourselves become fully present. O'Neill then stood in the middle of the circle and invited us to imagine a village high in the mountains, setting the scene for us and then encouraging us to contribute by calling out answers to her questions: What buildings are there? Who lives there? What work do they do?

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Participants shouted out suggestions like “school”, “shrine”, “shepherds” and we gradually formed an idea of the village, collective world-building in action. Dan O’Neill was the facilitator’s right-hand man, ensuring that despite our huge group of participants, everyone was included and involved. Someone shouted “hospital” and O’Neill responded gravely, “there was a hospital once, but it’s long gone”, a beautiful moment of accepting the suggestion whilst framing it decisively in a way which deepened our understanding of the conditions of the village.

Dividing us into three groups (no easy feat!), O’Neill approached each group individually to give them secret instructions. I loved the suspense; what was she saying? When she approached my group in role as our glorious leader, she shouted triumphantly “Comrades! We have won!” We all cheered in response, rebel roles instantly established, and she quickly explained our task. Our rebel army had finally overthrown the oppressive monarchy, but the queen had escaped with the help of a male informant and fled to the mountains. Our orders were to track them to the village they were hiding in and to round up the villagers and question them. We all began to fire out questions: What should we do if we find them? How will we handle prisoners who don’t comply? The rebel leader said a sentence that chilled me to the bone: “Do what you must”. She turned away from us, and I stood frozen as the implications of those words hit me. In one sentence, I was fully immersed in the drama, envisioning the potential horrors if we chose to interpret her words, in their terrifying vagueness, to justify whatever actions we wanted to take. Instantly invested, I turned back to my comrades and we began to talk tactics, agreeing on secret signals to prove to each other that we were also rebels and to summon other rebels for support when we found someone suspicious.

The villagers stood clustered together in the centre of the room, formulating their own plans based on the facilitator’s instructions. My fellow rebels and I began to sidle over, gradually infiltrating the circle and beginning to ask questions. The villagers responded with suspicion and hostility, telling us they didn’t recognise us and asking how long we had lived in the village. Suddenly, one of the rebels said casually, “We know the informant is a man, let’s just divide up all the men”. Chaos! The female villagers stood in front of the men defiantly, refusing to hand them over, shouting to each other to resist. In role as our leader, O’Neill calmed for order and told the rebels to bring the chosen suspects up onto the stage, a guard standing behind each one. The atmosphere became tense and sombre as the rebels tried to justify their suspicions. One woman was under suspicion because she had soft hands, the rebels claiming that she couldn’t be a villager; she must be the queen. Two suspects claimed to be neighbours and were questioned to see if they gave the same answers. Eventually, the rebel leader ordered the guards to take the suspects away to be questioned. We watched them walk offstage in solemn silence. Where were they going? What would happen to them?

I felt deep emotional investment, reminded of a moment in “From Old Bean Grows Bak Choy” when we learned that several of Chan’s friends had been arrested for their political beliefs. I found myself reflecting on the potential for atrocity when people are arbitrarily rounded up and interrogated by those with unchecked authority: “Do what you must” rang in my ears. I saw my feelings reflected in the faces of many of my fellow rebels and villagers: it was a powerful moment of aesthetic engagement.

Having established the events of the story, O’Neill then organised us into three groups to create statues celebrating the great rebel victory in defeating the monarchy and ousting the queen. It was my first time attempting a tableau with thirty people! Plenty of confusion and hilarity ensued, a welcome break from the heaviness of the previous scene. With such large groups, the resulting tableaux resembled giant Renaissance paintings, full of energy and action. We then had to imagine ourselves fifty years in the future and create a new statue celebrating the return of the monarchy, reflecting on the cycles of war and revolution.

Our drama concluded with the voices of those who had been silenced, the suspects who had been led away for questioning. The facilitator asked them to stand on the stage again and this time to tell us what had happened to them all those years ago, distancing us in time and thus diluting some of the intensity of the arrest scene. The suspects shared their stories and provided us with a satisfying conclusion. The soft-handed woman confirmed that she was indeed the queen (cue gasps from the audience!) and shared how the villagers had helped and protected her. The woman who had been interrogated alongside her neighbours told us that she had been released after a few days of questioning but never saw her neighbour again. A solemn silence followed this revelation and Cecily O’Neill nodded gravely and thanked her.

The story which affected me the most was that of the village shoemaker. He gave a heartfelt account of the beautiful shoes he had made for the queen, asking plaintively what was wrong with a person just wanting to make beautiful things, why should the rebels be angry with him for simply doing his job? This offer was accepted and built upon by another villager, who told us that he had bought the beautiful shoes meant for a queen and given them to his granddaughter as a gift. A poignant end to our story. O’Neill concluded the drama at this point, thanking the participants for their skilful storytelling and sharing that the inspiration for our drama had come from *The Queen and the Rebels* by Ugo Betti. We finished the workshop as we had begun, with a mindful movement activity facilitated by Dan O’Neill. We danced in a circle doing individual moves then had to choose someone else and switch to following their moves, eventually ending up with the whole circle dancing in sync. A fitting metaphor for the workshop, and indeed the conference: a group of individuals coming together in creative collaboration.

11 Panel Four: Celebrating a Legacy, Imagining the Future

The first speaker for Panel Four was Stig Eriksson, Professor Emeritus in Drama Education and Applied Theatre at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, who began with the words, “We honour what has been given and what will be”. He shared some of his personal memories of working with Cecily O’Neill and praised her contribution to the field of drama in education as the interplay of process and product, remarking that participation in such processes is not necessarily safe (in the sense of being predictable). In O’Neill’s own words, he said, “Drama is dangerous”. Eriksson expanded upon the idea of safety versus predictability, referring to Luhman’s (2017) distinction between calculable risks and unforeseen dangers, reflecting on how this tension makes drama a dynamic learning environment, not just for the classroom, but for life.

Joe Salvatore, Clinical Professor and Director of Educational Theatre, New York University, spoke next, describing his background as a dramaturge and reflecting on his initial confusion with the terminology of Process Drama until he saw Cecily O’Neill in action and realised that what she called “Process Drama”, he recognised as improvising, directing and devising plays in the moment. He realised that O’Neill was “acting as a dramaturge on her feet” and the connection between their work became clear. He quoted her as saying, “Dramaturges are the midwives of the new play” and reminisced fondly about the twelve years he spent working with Professor O’Neill when she was artist in residence at New York University, producing 36 plays during that time.

Judith Ackroyd, Professor of Applied Theatre and Drama Education at the University of Gloucestershire, began her presentation in role as Mrs Green, a role that O’Neill had adopted when facilitating a Process Drama with Ackroyd’s students. Ackroyd shared how O’Neill’s shift to a more bureaucratic style of Teacher-in-Role positively facilitated student engagement, noting: “She chooses to be a person not worth opposing”. She told a story of another Process Drama in which students in role on the moon were asked to describe an object they had found there. To Ackroyd’s consternation, the students decided that they had discovered a whisky bottle! While she wondered how on earth this could be incorporated into the drama, O’Neill considered the offer gravely, then said to the children, “Ah, someone has been here before...” Another example of the expert in action, skilfully weaving the student contribution into a story that made sense.

The final speaker, Amanda Kipling, Lecturer in Education and Lifelong Learning at Goldsmiths, University of London, gave an overview of the status of drama within the UK curriculum over the years, highlighting the contributions of Cecily O’Neill and her predecessors and reminding us that there is still plenty of work to be done. She reflected on the meaningful impact of

learning through drama as a lived, collaborative experience, and agreed with O'Neill that we are lucky to have the opportunity to work with such a creative subject. She ended her presentation by reiterating the need for high-quality drama for present and future students to be present and playful as they try to navigate a changing world, eloquently expressed by a quote from one of her students: "Drama helped me escape my reality and face it at the same time".

12 Conclusion

Through two days of enriching academic discussion, evocative theatre, shared stories and heartfelt tributes, *Where Imagination Becomes Experience* celebrated Professor Cecily O'Neill as a teacher, author, artist, mentor and friend, recognising the many ways in which her work and presence has enriched our lives both professionally and personally. In her closing remarks, Cecily O'Neill commented on the necessity of human imagination for the development of a positive future, stating: "If you can't imagine freedom and justice, you can't achieve them." It is true that what we can imagine, we can create, and those of us fortunate enough to work in the creative spaces of drama and education owe our thanks to the ones before us who dared to imagine new possibilities.

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