Teacher to Teacher

What Unusual Films Do You Use in the English Classroom?

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Stomp Out Loud
(Directed by Luke Cresswell and Steve McNicholas. Yes/No Productions Ltd., 1997. Running time 50 minutes, not rated.)

To help composition students utilize the sound and structure of language to underscore the meaning of their written thoughts, I use the video Stomp Out Loud. This is the taped version of the traveling performance artist group called Stomp, who use "ordinary objects to make extraordinary sounds." The performers create percussion compositions with garbage cans, broomsticks, kitchen utensils, basketballs, cards, tap shoes, underwater pipes, and a host of other everyday items. The scenes incorporate comedy and plenty of bodily movement that’s exciting to watch.

I show a portion of the fifty-minute film, asking students to keep in mind one scene from several they will see, remembering or noting on paper the instruments, setting, and especially the sounds of that scene. Afterwards I ask them to write a few lines describing their scene, using the phonetic intensives, onomatopoeia, alliteration, assonance, and other devices we’ve reviewed. They may not name the instruments used but rather must describe the sounds of those instruments. Students share their descriptions, others guess the scene, and for future reference we make a list of the most effective words. Reading aloud helps students hear how their diction and sentence structure reflect the video’s rhythms and sounds.

I precede Stomp with two activities. The first asks students to think of good “sound-words.” In a not-quite-onomatopoeic fashion these words sound like what they mean: cacophony, garbled, and undulate, for example. Another activity includes a homework assignment that asks students to describe a repetitive noise they find in the outside world without naming the source of the noise, and students guess each others’ instruments. Examples include jackhammers, cars slowing and accelerating through intersections, or someone typing. This assignment encourages students to use sound-words to imitate the noises they hear, enhancing their descriptive skills.

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Enchanted April
(Directed by Mike Newell. Miramax, 1991. Running time 93 minutes, rated PG.)

Four women in post-World War I London, strangers to each other, rent an Italian villa in order to escape the discontent of their lives in England. Together they experience how a sort of magical place, away from civilization, can restore the human spirit. I have used Enchanted April both in conjunction with A Midsummer Night’s Dream and as a conclusion to a thematic unit on relationships. Both A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Enchanted April present the difference between reality and some sort of “getaway.” Students can explore what people risk and gain from leaving “society” in this way. What are the aspects of the getaway that make it different from home or society? Students can then examine the society’s expectations, especially for the women in the two stories. What do these women risk, gain, and/or lose in defying society? In addition, the plots of both play and film deal with people falling in and out of love, and the serious and comic factors involved can be compared and contrasted.

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I have also used *Enchanted April* as the conclusion to a unit on relationships. Some considerations: How are marital conflicts created and resolved? In what ways do the women succeed or fail in their quest for identity and happiness? How are the women different in terms of social attitudes, outlook on life, social class, and age? What conflicts grow from their differences, and what do the women do to resolve those conflicts and create friendships out of their differences? All of these considerations can lead into discussion and writing about how these concerns relate to students’ lives.

Any number of concluding activities can spring from viewing this film, but any assessment should include analysis of an issue with the help of details from the film, connections to other selections in the thematic unit, and reflections on the issue in the students’ lives.

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*Seven Samurai*
(Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Toho, 1954. Running time 200 minutes, rated PG.)

Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* was an effective film for my literature and film class on three levels: from the multicultural perspective, as a travelogue of sixteenth century Japan; as an enduring example of dazzling technical expertise; and as a multilayered adventure story of seven warriors coming together to rid a poor farming village of bandits who had plagued them for years. My students enjoyed writing about all three components.

Western viewers of Kurosawa’s film are exposed to a different culture and historical period. The film begins with a panorama of a Japanese farming village; although this may seem to be a narrow focus, the interactions of the villagers with the comparatively worldly samurai immensely broaden the picture we see. Also, the film takes place when firearms were first being introduced. The impact of these new weapons on the villagers and the samurai provides fertile ground for discussion.

Kurosawa’s technical skills are well displayed in *Seven Samurai*, and discussing various techniques adds to the impact of the film. My favorite example is a graphic match that shows the samurai as they react to the first sign of danger in the village. As the alarm is sounded and the samurai race to the village, Kurosawa shows each samurai individually, one after the other, in identical shots. This scene portrays both the individuality of the men and their common mentality as warriors. Kurosawa also uses many interesting close-ups, as well as medium and long shots throughout the film.

Although my students were riveted to their seats as they watched the samurai defeat the marauding bandits, *Seven Samurai* is much more than just an adventure film. We form a connection with the characters through a series of subtle interwoven scenes, and the effect is heartrending. My students gave this epic film five stars.

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*Three Sovereigns for Sarah*
(Directed by Philip Leacock. Nightowl Productions, 1985. Running time 180 minutes, not rated.)

It was one of the most compelling epochs in American history, helping to shape the values of authors that followed it. And yet, for teachers of American literature, it is a period that is often approached with a mixture of dread and trepidation.

How does one teach the Puritan era?
Over the years I have tried various introductory strategies, but nothing has been as effective as showing the film *Three Sovereigns for Sarah*. Starring Vanessa Redgrave, the movie returns its audience to the rustic austerity of seventeenth-century America, capturing the dull, sterile landscape, the suspicious politics, the ambivalence of the people. For those teachers who are eager to approach American literature from either a thematic or chronological perspective, *Three Sovereigns for Sarah* is effective both in its authenticity and in its ability to interest high school students.

*Three Sovereigns for Sarah* is a riveting reenactment of the Salem witch trials—the political divisions and curious superstitions that transpired in the final decade of the seventeenth century. Despite the popular attention surrounding this event, teachers will find that students have a rather vague and uneven knowledge of the incident; thus, the film is invaluable in setting the context for Puritan literature and philosophy. It begins with Sarah, played by Vanessa Redgrave, trekking wearily across the Massachusetts countryside. Her destination is a group of three English judges who
will adjudicate her claims that she and her sisters were unlawfully accused of and persecuted for witchcraft in 1692. But before any decision can be made, Sarah must narrate the poignant events that led to the arrests and executions of people for being witches. Equally important, she must explain the political motivations that drove townspeople to betray their neighbors and execute them for supposedly making a covenant with the devil.

As Sarah wends her way through the grisly details, beginning with Tituba and the children for whom she cared, we are pulled into the frightening realities of the hysteria. At the same time, we see the territorial wrangling that seemed to directly affect the persecution of certain people. As we relive the event, we become acquainted with real victims and villains from the past. We become entangled in the sanctimony, in the frenetic search for scapegoats.

As a teacher of American literature, I particularly appreciate the historical background the picture provides. *Three Sovereigns for Sarah* is brutally intriguing, and its attention to accuracy is impressive. As teachers try to spark an interest in the Puritans and the first writings of European Americans, they’ll find this film an effective way to introduce this cultural watershed—a watershed that still has implications for America today.

**Boy Soldiers**

An unusual film that I have used in both a children’s literature and a media course is *Boy Soldiers*. I use this historical filmic text to explore how notions of history might be expressed and to discern which images and scenes are selected in this representation of the past.

In 1910 the Australian government passed a law requiring all boys between fourteen and seventeen to register for compulsory military training. This story tells of Will Barnes, a fourteen-year-old conscientious objector, who refuses to register and is subsequently prosecuted and sentenced to three months training at Fort Queenscliff, outside of Melbourne. The film revisits the issue of military conscription and provides a backdrop for this highly contentious issue. Two subsequent referenda on the issue were narrowly defeated.

Following are some of our class activities:

- In pairs, the students make notes about the various elements of *mise-en-scene*—use of costumes, lighting, architecture, locations, and acting styles—to consider what they add to the total effect.
- In groups, students select several scenes to explore the ways in which the cluster of resonances around the notion of war are depicted: recruitment posters, a white feather, newspaper headlines, and banners calling men to enlist.
- Students examine the way the film is structured around binary oppositions: city/country (sea); urban landscape/fort landscape; bravery/cowardice; law and order/larrikin; Australia/Mother England.

We also explore the following questions:

- How does this film portray the Australians of the early 1900s?
- How is color used in the film to construct meaning?

Together, we consider the accuracy of this film as a portrayal of what really happened and the importance of accuracy in a film based on historical occurrences and real people.

**The Apostle**

When I watched *The Apostle*, I was struck by the complexity of the life that Sonny led. In the film, a hypocritical charismatic preacher faces life struggles in a realistic way. The preacher is the villain as well as the hero, which caused many people to dislike the film. Despite this, I was excited to use the film because it reflects our world: The sharp contrast between moral expectation and an immoral lifestyle parallels the situation our country faces with our President.

I presented the movie to my class after they developed a theme idea in response to the question,
What does mankind believe about mankind? Although they worked in separate groups, they arrived at similar themes. While watching the movie, the students looked for evidence of their theme. I also supplied them with a study guide of twenty-five questions in order to keep them focused, to help them note details they might miss, and to help them develop ideas about the purpose of the film.

The discussion that followed was amazing. The students were intensely involved, arguing about the main character’s responsibilities to his church, his course of action, and the accuracy of the theme. The overriding question concerned the motivation behind the preacher’s actions, which led to a discussion about the motivation behind the President’s actions. Students made the connection to our country without my help. We discussed the moral standards we have today, the actions of the President, and the actions of those involved in the hearings and debates. The students and I enjoyed the class, a highly intellectual discussion with very little “bashing.”

We concluded the unit by applying the theme of mankind to the other works that we read throughout the semester, which served as a good culminating activity. More importantly, it made the students look at literature in a different way. The novels they had previously studied suddenly reflected and connected to their world, and this made them passionate about learning.

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Pathfinder
(Directed by Nils Gaup. Distributed by Fox/Lorber Home Video, 1987. Running time 88 minutes, not rated.)

The first time I used Pathfinder with my students, I gave the class a little background, turned on the VCR, and held my breath. Showing this film was a gamble. First of all, it’s a foreign-language film, and showing a film with subtitles is always risky. (“You mean we have to read this movie?”); moreover, the film takes place in tenth century Lapland.

The movie opens to a scene of desolate snow-covered terrain. A teenage boy, Aigen, returning on skis from hunting, watches in horror from a hill overlooking his family’s camp as a band of men drag the bodies of his parents and sister into holes in the ice. While the action here is shocking in its portrayal of the violence of life a thousand years ago, students are hooked: They have to know what happens to Aigen.

The bandits discover Aigen and wound him, but he escapes and stumbles into the camp of a band of nomads. These good people take him in and treat his wounds. When it becomes apparent that he has led the bandits directly to his new friends and placed them in danger, Aigen must find a way to save them.

I use Pathfinder in my world literature classes to accompany units either on legends or on the theme of communities. The film works well because it is so teachable. First of all, the story is compelling; secondly, the film is visually rich and contains vivid images and symbols. Finally, Pathfinder lends itself well to discussion. Students have strong reactions to the film, and class talk often centers on the nature of heroes and the interdependence of people in communities.

I’ve been successful in provoking rich conversation by using a viewing guide that contains open-ended questions and a section for students to record visual images and any questions they have. At various points in the film we pause the tape, the students write or reflect silently for a few minutes, then we discuss.

Correction

Susan Armiger would like to acknowledge her colleague, Brian Lawrence, for his contribution to her idea for Teacher to Teacher (May 1999).