

Drama for Thought, Talk and Writing

Patrice Baldwin



We know that Drama as a way of teaching and learning can be highly effective. We also know that teachers embarking on the use of drama as a pedagogy require some training. With more initial teacher training happening 'on the job,' and primary drama specialists and Drama Advisers now a rarity, the amount and quality of drama in schools that new teachers come across is a real lottery. Sadly, young teachers increasingly tell me that they have had no experience of drama in schools at all and no drama within their training. Primary drama teachers with no training are likely to avoid it or stick to the straightforward re-enactment

and performance of stories. Teachers who had a minimal day of training years ago, usually through the national strategies, seem to have forgotten about drama or use a few drama strategies repeatedly, namely, hot-seating, freeze frame, thought-tracking. Drama has a powerful, broad and flexible toolkit of strategies that could become a valuable part of any class teacher's repertoire.

Even the word 'Drama' seems to strike fear into the hearts of many primary teachers. They all too easily recall their fear and embarrassment at being put 'on the spot' against their will as reluctant and under-rehearsed performers. Some have avoided Drama ever since and the children in their

classes end up missing out. I ask them, 'If you had a bad maths experience at school, would you therefore think it was OK to avoid teaching maths?' I ask head teachers if they would accept some classes having maths and not others, depending on whether a teacher wants to teach it or not? Drama should not be an option.

If teachers (and head teachers) have the opportunity to see Drama strategies being used purposefully and skilfully with their classes then they are likely to want to embed it as a way of improving teaching, making it more active and interactive. If they can see for themselves that the strategies can be looked at through 'thought, talk, write'

lenses, that lead to improvements in writing, then having Drama as a pedagogy throughout the school, should become irresistible!

'I did some drama training myself when I was a class teacher, when I was involved in the D4LC project. Then I became a headteacher. Now I want all my teachers to have some drama training. I want their lessons to become more interactive and less 'delivered' by the teacher. I know that Drama can help us shift the teaching here from good to outstanding.'

Headteacher, Norfolk

'I was very nervous about being involved in this drama project but I have really enjoyed it. I am using drama now with my class and I can see that the writing has improved. My reluctant writers are writing more now too.'

Class teacher, Norfolk

The curriculum in most primary schools gives insufficient time to the arts. Nationally tested subjects increasingly dominate the school day. Slim amounts of arts time are more likely to be allocated art and design and music, as schools want to cover their backs with Ofsted and these are national curriculum subjects. The imbalanced and narrow curriculum we have been dealt makes it easy for schools (and children) to forget

that Drama is a main art form. In the primary national curriculum Drama is just a few bullet points within another subject, English.

Drama for writing appears specifically within the lower primary (Years 3 and 4), programmes of study:

'Drama and role-play can contribute to the quality of pupils' writing by providing opportunities for pupils to develop and order their ideas through playing roles and improvising scenes in various settings'.

Logically, the above statement could be applied to any year group but someone (presumably not a Drama specialist), decided to place it neatly within Years 3 and 4.

How can Drama thrive in primary schools when there is a government dictated test agenda and inspection system that ignores it?

- With shrinking school INSET budgets, schools need increasingly to be able to justify Drama in relation to identified areas for school improvement. Improving writing remains a key priority for many schools.
- Schools are being continuously persuaded or forced into working as groups and clusters, increasingly as part of Academy chains but sometimes on a less formal and flexible basis.

Schools are most likely to respond to an initiative that genuinely links school improvement and Drama in a sustained way. Having previously created and directed Drama for Learning and Creativity (D4LC) between 2005 and 2011 (eventually involving over 300 schools), I set about creating a new initiative that would be closely matched to fit the current educational landscape. I called it Drama for Thought, Talk and Writing (DTTW) and it started in 2015. It is ongoing in East Anglia and likely to be developed in Sussex in 2017.

I advertised the opportunity first to Norfolk schools and soon received enquiries and applications from several groups of schools in Norfolk and an Academy Chain in Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. I decided to work with one or two groups each term for a year. The groups each contained between three and six schools. One group of schools was in Kings Lynn; another was strung along the North Norfolk coast; and three of the groups were situated in, and close to, the Fens of Cambridgeshire and west Norfolk.

What did schools receive and commit to?

- Pairs of teachers from each school attended an initial training day and participated in KS1 and KS2 lessons;
- I visited each school within a couple of weeks of the training day and led 2 class lessons (one in each participating teacher's class). The teachers decided the lesson themes and objectives in advance, so that the lessons fitted with their curriculum and were not just 'bolt-on.' The teacher was an active participant with me in the lesson. 'Just watching' my lesson was not allowed. We evaluated the lesson together afterwards;
- The teachers all agreed to try using some Drama strategies in

Children creating 'Talking Objects' in the hall of Heorot



- their lessons, evaluate the lessons and gather evidence of impact;
- The teachers linked writing opportunities to the Drama and collected examples of writing from within or after the Drama lesson ;
 - Teachers attended a planning session where we planned some Drama for Thought, Talk and Writing lessons from ideas, themes and resources brought by the teachers;
 - I visited each pair of teachers again, in their schools. This time, the teachers had each planned their own lesson and I was an active co-participant. They could allocate me a particular role if they wished. We evaluated the lesson together afterwards and considered their 'next steps';
 - We all came back together for a project evaluation afternoon. They brought samples of children's writing and reported back on the impact and outcomes (for themselves and their pupils.) I facilitated, using an 'Action Learning' approach to help enable individual and group feedback.

A selection of evaluation comments

'I'd got out of using Drama but now I have started again and I'm loving it! So are the children.'

'Most of the drama techniques were new to me. I've learned a lot and am putting Drama into my planning now. I've already seen a big difference in their story writing.'

'At last I understand the pedagogy behind the drama. I knew some drama activities but didn't really know what to do with them before. It was very helpful having it modelled by Patrice, with my own class.'

'It made a big difference getting involved in the Drama myself. It's been an eye-opener and very enjoyable.'



Teachers on a training day, creating the monster Grendel.

The schools

So far 30 schools have been involved in groups of between three and six. The schools were all supported for a term. Three of the groups were paid for by an Academy chain, one group each term.

It was evident that not all teachers had wanted to be involved at the start, although most softened.

'I must admit that I was not looking forward to this but I am using some Drama in my teaching now. I couldn't see how drama would fit in before but now I can. The children are enjoying it and it is making a difference to their writing.'

Class teacher, Cambridgeshire

The Drama for Thought, Talk and Writing (DTTW) lessons

The 60+ lessons in schools were diverse and based on the teacher's planned curriculum, e.g. Elizabeth 1st, The Fire of London, *Beowulf*, Ancient Egypt, *The Tunnel* by Anthony Brown, *Rachel's Story* (BBC Learning), Living and Growing, Superheroes, Rainforests, etc.

During a couple of the training days, I used the story of the hero, *Beowulf*, as a stimulus and several of the teachers subsequently tried out lessons on *Beowulf*, with their classes.

'My Year 5 children are loving learning about and reading Beowulf. It's producing some of our best drama and writing outcomes yet.'

Below is the unit of work on *Beowulf* that I created and used on some of the training days. I also have used this lesson in one of my drama workshops for Pie Corbett, as part of his Storytelling and the Arts project at The Wroxham School.

The original Old English version of this epic poem is readily available but there are more child friendly versions by Pie Corbett, Michael Foreman, Kevin Crossley-Holland and other children's authors.

I too have written a version of *Beowulf* as a narrative poem for KS2. Part one of my poem is included in this article, to support the Drama lesson plan.

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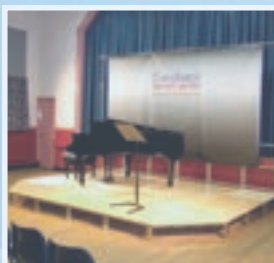
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The Drama enables and supports the class to write, as they:

- Imagine the setting, characters and events in an engaging, collaborative, multi-sensory and memorable way;
- Are stimulated to think, speak, share and write their own words, sentences and phrases associated with the above (individually and together);
- Hear other people's vocabulary, structured sentences and phrases associated with the above, (some of which are added by the teacher as a co-participant);
- Talk aloud inner thoughts and feelings at key moments (their own and those of characters, eye witnesses, reporters, objects, and so on);
- Generate and hear some possible dialogue by and between characters, that can then be presented in written form; for example, monologue, playscript, prose, poetry.

At the end of this article, I have included a copy of a handout that I recently produced to highlight how various Drama Strategies support the development of a story collectively through Drama, prior to children possibly writing parts of the story themselves.

BEOWOLF

Still Image/Tableau

What do we think Grendel might have been like?

In turn, children enter the centre of a circle, adding themselves to a single, collective still image of the monster, Grendel. As each person gets into position they speak a descriptive sentence as the part of the monster, 'I am Grendel's skin. I am rough and scaly.'

Rumours

What do the Danes say about Grendel?

Every Dane in the vicinity has heard or seen something of Grendel over the last 12 years (or imagines they have). In role as Danes, the children move around, creating, gathering and sharing tales, gossip and rumours about Grendel.

Freeze/Frame Eavesdropping

The scene of Danes chatting is now frozen, (freeze frame) and the teacher passes through the scene. Whoever the teacher passes, thaws and speaks aloud, so that all can hear snippets of the 'overheard conversations'. Once the teacher has passed by, the speakers stop talking and freeze again.

Conscience Alley Teacher in Role

Should Beowulf sail to Denmark and try to kill Grendel?

The class makes two lines, facing each other. The teacher as Beowulf walks between the lines. Those in one line try to persuade Beowulf to go and kill Grendel, whereas those on the other line try to persuade him not to go.

Collective Role Improvisation

What is the conversation between Beowulf and Hrothgar when Beowulf arrives?

2 groups (of about 6), take on the roles of Hrothgar and Beowulf. No child may speak twice in a row. They improvise their meeting, as either Beowulf or Hrothgar.

Talking Objects

What can be/has been/will be seen, inside the great Mead Hall of Heriot?

It is night-time. Several children individually enter the Hall and place themselves as an inanimate object, e.g. armour, table, bench, chair, goblet, tapestry, etc. They enter the space and state what object they are. They also offer a viewpoint about the chances of Beowulf succeeding this night.

Teacher in Role

As Beowulf, the teacher moves around the hall and the objects speak directly now to Beowulf as he passes. The moment is just before Grendel is heard and seen.

Sensing the Moment

Some children (as Geats) hide amongst the objects and wait for Grendel. They speak aloud what they can see, hear, smell and touch (giving a short description), e.g. 'I can see the candles burning low, wax dripping to the floor'. 'I can smell...'. A collective scene is built that focuses on imagined sensory experiences.

I Wonder

As Beowulf passes them they wonder aloud, 'I wonder if he is feeling fear...'

Still Image

The children are now in groups of 4. They create a still image (statue) that matches a scene from the poem. These are presented as dream images and may be symbolic rather than realistic representations.

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------------|--|
| 1. Beowulf sails to Denmark | 4. The Geats hide from Grendel | 7. Beowulf detaches the arm of Grendel |
| 2. Beowulf is greeted by King Hrothgar | 5. Grendel kills Leofric | 8. Grendel dies |
| 3. Unferth doubts Beowulf | 6. Grendel fights Beowulf | 9. Beowulf is celebrated as a hero |

Performance Carousel

These scenes can be presented in turn with no break between them, as a continuous performance sequence. The sentence is spoken aloud as a caption for the scene.

Talking Partners in Role

In pairs, one child was an eye witness of the killing of Grendel. The other was not present and wants to find out more, through questioning. This may be years later or soon after.

Beowulf (Part 1)

Beowulf a young and great warrior,
Set off to give freedom to Danes
To kill a grim monster called Grendel
That would eat men and leave no remains.

Grendel hated the sound of Danes feasting
Detested their songs and their mirth.
It would drive him to kill, to slaughter at will
Then he'd slide back content with a smirk.

Twelve years the poor Danes had feared Grendel
Twelve years they had dreaded his bite.
He could rip men apart, and gobble their hearts
With no real chance of a fight.

Beowulf sailed across the dark waters
Arrived on the bleak Danish shore
Headed straight for the great hall of Herriot
And passed through the heavy oak door.

'I have come here to kill the beast, Grendel
I have come here to free you from dread.
With bare hands, I will grab and will crush him
And I'll not return home 'til he's dead.'

'Welcome Beowulf', said Hrothgar the royal
'Please feast with us first, if you will
You must eat to stay strong, for your fight will be long
And Grendel will be hard to kill.'

'You cannot kill Grendel' jeered Unferth
'Your words, they mean nothing at all
It's action we need, you must make Grendel bleed
You just boast big but really, you're small.'

Beowulf's stare remained calm and determined
He'd not rise to bait from this Dane.
He knew he was strong and the fight could be long
And he knew he'd earn fortune and fame.

Then Wealhthow, the Queen slowly entered
She fixed Beowulf with her eyes
She wondered by dawn, would they have him to mourn
Or would daybreak bring forth a surprise?

Drunken Danes left and went into hiding.
Geats stayed in the hall, filled with fear.
They listened for sounds. Was Grendel around?
Would they ever just walk out of here?

Grendel slithered through slime and soft nightfall.
Grendel slobbered towards the dark hall
Gave a blood curdling roar and lunged through the door
Gobbling Leofric, fresh bones, blood and all.

Grendel ground his great teeth. Now for Beowulf!
Red blood flew with spit from his jaw.
He'd tasted fresh meat, delicious and sweet
And soon he'd be gorging on more.

Beowulf grabbed the sharp claw arm of Grendel.
He twisted it fast in his grasp.
He wrenched it and gripped it and lifted and ripped it,
Tore the arm from the body, so vast.

Beowulf held high the loose arm of Grendel
And triumph shone bright in his eyes.
Grendel let out a howl, that stench it was foul
Then he limped towards marshland to die.

Now Beowulf became a great hero
For the momentous task he had done.
He was fearless and bold, Hrothgar showered
him with gold
And thought of him now, as a son.

Then Wealhthow, the Queen, gravely entered.
Her plea to her husband was clear
'Give him gold if you must but he's not one of us
Not a son, not so precious my dear.'

Grendel's claw, now hung high in the great hall
A trophy from Beowulf's great fight.
Danes returned there to sleep, feeling safe and replete
Expecting no monster tonight ...

Within their poetry, ►
children used images
and language that
had been generated
within the drama.

Friday 12th February
Grendel's mother and ~~her~~ ~~mother~~?
Grendel's mother has blood left like acid.
Claws and teeth as sharp as 10 million knives.
As scaly as a dragon.
Eyes as red as blood.
Muscles as strong as a giant.

Grendel's mother
Grendel's Mother,
has blood like acid,
as scaly as a snake,
and as strong as a bear,
When a fist like fire,
comes
It burns you entire,
She's got red eyes,
redder than fire,
She's got claws,
Sharper than knives,
and muscles as strong,
as 20 men in each hand,
Beowulf is fighting,
brave and true,
who will win,
to be continued. what bet

HOW DRAMA STRATEGIES CAN SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF STORY-MAKING AND STORY-TELLING

DRAMA STRATEGY

CHARACTER

What is the character like? – (Description)

- Ask someone who knows the character or has observed him/her.
- Talk with the character themselves.
- Place and watch the character in different situations, times and settings.

Teacher in role

Small group playmaking

Performance Carousel

What does the character think and feel?

- Talk with the character and ask what they are thinking and ask what they are feeling.
- Listen to the character speak his/her inner thoughts out loud.
- The character stands in the centre of a standing circle and those in the circle can cross the circle, passing the character and speaking aloud a thought as the character, to the character or about the character.
- Divide the class into 2 lines. At a moment of indecision, the different lines speak aloud the conflicting thoughts (pros and cons) in the character's head. We hear the conflicting thoughts spoken aloud, as the character passes along the line and passes each person.

Hot-seating; Shadowy Role

Thought-tracking

Passing Thoughts; Monologue

Conscience Alley

What does the character do? (Actions)

- Create/watch the character in action at various key moments in scenes.
- Interview eye witnesses who have seen the character in action.
- Create/re-create/re-enact what the character has done (or might do next.)

Improvisation; Small group play-making

Eye-witness;

Small group playmaking

How does the character change? (Character development)

- Create/watch scenes (of a character's key moments). Bring them to life and freeze them for comment and discussion about the character.
- Jot comments/observations/characteristics (using removable labels or a series of outlines) around a drawn outline of the character. Which labels (characteristics) would you agree to leave, keep, modify or remove at different points in the story/drama timeline and why?
- If in the future, you were to write an epitaph for this character (or a plaque for a statue you create of him/her), how would you portray/present/ encapsulate the essence of this character posthumously? What is the significant sentence that you would write and/or speak aloud about them?
- Interview someone, who has known the character over a period of time.

Small group playmaking; Freeze frame

Role on the Wall

Statues; Still image; Captioning

Hot-seating; Shadowy Role

DIALOGUE (AND MONOLOGUE)

What do characters say to themselves? (Internal monologue – thinking aloud – soliloquy)

- Walk around as the character and talk to yourself (in role), about what you think and feel or about a situation or event. Some children could then volunteer to be 'overheard' by the class, as they repeat or continue their 'thought walk' as the character.
- The character stands in the centre of a class circle (standing). Those in the circle can choose to pass by the character one at a time and speak aloud one of his/her thoughts.

Thought-walk (monologue);
Eavesdropping/Overheard conversations

Passing Thoughts

What do characters say to each other?

- Create a still image of a significant moment, in which each person in the scene is initially allowed to speak only one sentence before freezing the scene (improvised and/or rehearsed). Bring the scenes to life one at a time to share what is being said.
- Create a key scene with characters in it. The scene could be planned first, or improvised first. It can be rehearsed, re-enacted and shared through performance. The characters (in role), could then be questioned by the class about what they said (and did) in the scene.

Still image; Freeze-frame; Performance
Carousel

Small group playmaking; Performance
Carousel; Hot-seating; Shadowy Role

What do characters say about each other?

- Walk around and mutter to yourself about a character or event in the story.
- Ask questions about a character, of someone who knows the character well, e.g. their mother, friend or neighbour. Get their viewpoint, personal anecdotes and opinion.
- Set up a scene with a main character absent. The others can then start to spontaneously talk, whisper and gossip in role, about the absent character. This can be gossiping in pairs, small groups or the whole class.

Thought-walk

Hot-seating; Shadowy Role

Rumours

HOW DRAMA STRATEGIES CAN SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF STORY-MAKING AND STORY-TELLING

DRAMA STRATEGY

SETTING

Where is our story happening?

- From a class circle (standing), invite them to enter a central space, (one at a time) and add themselves to the place, as an object. They should say what object they are, describe themselves and give one piece of information about it; for example, 'I am the door to Heorot Hall. I am made of very old wood and am heavy to push open.'
- As above but instead of objects, they can physically become features of a natural or man-made landscape, e.g. 'I am a deep swamp and I have reeds and branches hanging over me.'
- You can use an actual image or piece of text, from which they select information about the setting and choose what they will depict with their bodies. For example, they could look at a picture of a medieval meeting hall and recreate it by becoming the ire, the spit, benches, shields, and so on before Grendel enters.
- The class can collectively (in turn or simultaneously), draw a map or picture of the setting, on a big piece of paper, placed in the centre. In turn they can each enter and add something to the map or picture. As they do so, they should say something about what they are adding; for example, 'This is the long table that the King's guests will sit at. It has already got blood stains on it.'

Physical Theatre; Mime;
Talking Objects

Talking Objects

Talking Objects

Mapping

What can we see around us?

- Ask the children to close their eyes and then say, 'Let the eye inside your head look around this place where our story will take place... I wonder what you can see... keep your eyes closed and soon you will be able to tell us what you can see... your sentence will start with, 'I can see'. Keeping their eyes closed and following the sentence opening rule (starting with, 'I can see...') children can share something from their imagined picture of the setting, for example, 'I can see wet footprints near the swamp...' and so on.

Visualisation

What can we hear around us?

- As above but saying what they imagine they can hear in the setting. They should start the sentences now with, 'I can hear...' For example, 'I can hear the sound of men breathing...'

Auralisation

What can we smell around us?

- As above but saying what they imagine they can smell in the setting. They should start the sentences now with, 'I can smell ...' e.g. 'I can smell roasted meat and smoke from the fire...'

Olfaction

What can we touch around us?

- As above but saying what they imagine they can touch in the setting. They should start the sentences now with, 'I can feel the cold floor of the hall...' For example, 'I can feel my sword in my hand...'

Tactile

NARRATING/STORYTELLING

When is this story happening?

- The teacher can tell the story in episodes using the children's ideas that have emerged through the drama activities. The teacher uses the children's ideas, words and phrases but may also elaborate and introduce new vocabulary.

Teacher as storyteller

Who is telling the story?

- Key scenes from the story can be created and performed by small groups. One person in the group stays outside the scene. The scene is shown twice, the first time naturalistically and the second time silently. The person outside the group narrates what is happening in the silent scene.
- Different characters can also step out and recount the scene differently, from their character's viewpoint.
- A narration can be provided by an eye witness to the scene.

Small group playmaking;
Performance carousel;
Storytelling

Storytelling

Eye witness account

What's the whole story?

- The class stand in a circle. The teacher in the centre tells the whole story. As the teacher tells the story, he/she goes around the circle signalling to individuals, pairs and small groups of children in turn, when to enter the circle as the characters and objects being mentioned in the story. When the circle is getting too full of children, the teacher simply says, 'Whoosh!' and they resume their place in the circle. The teacher then continues telling the story, saying, 'Whoosh!' whenever the central acting space needs emptying.

Active Storytelling;

Whoosh!

Who still remembers what happened?

- In pairs, one child (A) pretends to be an old person who remembers what happened in the past, as if it was yesterday. The other, is a child (B) who has never heard about this important event before. The first time A recounts the story of how Beowulf killed Grendel, B listens without interruption. The second time, B can ask questions of A.

Storytelling;
Improvisation

HOW DRAMA STRATEGIES CAN SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF STORY-MAKING AND STORY-TELLING

DRAMA STRATEGY

SIGNIFICANT OBJECTS AND ARTEFACTS

Who does/did this object belong to? What does it know and remember?

- From a class circle (standing), invite them to enter a central space, (one at a time) and add themselves to the scene, as an object in the story. They should state what object they are, describe themselves and give one piece of information, for example, 'I am Beowulf's sword. I was given to him by Unferth.'
- Children who do not become objects, can instead ask questions directly of the objects, addressing them by name, for example, 'Sword, where are you kept?' The object can answer or may choose not to.
- The objects can have conversations amongst themselves too, with the rest of the class listening in. The objects are often eye witnesses to scenes and can comment on characters and tell you what they have seen and heard, 'So sword, where does Beowulf put you when he is asleep?'

Physical Theatre; Talking objects; Mime;

Hotseating; Shadowy Role;

Improvisation

DRAMATIC TENSION

What about the moment before the key moment?

- Ask them to create a group still image and give it a caption. The image should show the split second before a key moment in the story, for example, 'The moment before Grendel entered the hall,' or 'The moment before Beowulf twisted off Grendel's arm.' The characters in the scenes can speak be asked to speak their thoughts aloud. The scene can then be brought to life in slow motion and the key moment depicted, before being frozen again for further investigation.
- In groups, create (using sound and movement), a repeated nightmare that a character is having before or after a key moment. To make the nightmare, they will be drawing on and maybe exaggerating the character's memories and anxieties.

Still image; Captioning; Thought-tracking; Freeze-frame; Hot-seating

Dance Drama; Movement

LEGACY

How will this story be remembered?

- Devise and present a lasting visual image to ensure that future generations will know and remember the story; for example, make themselves into a group, commemorative statue or painting.
- Give the visual image a one sentence plaque. What will it say?
- Devise and present a dance or song about the event for future generations to know about it.
- Retell the story through sounds alone. Perform it for a 'blind' (eyes closed) audience.

Still image; Statue

Captioning

Music/ Dance Drama;

Soundtrack

Further reading

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Patrice Baldwin was Chair of National Drama for more than a decade (until 2014) and was President of the International Drama Theatre and Education Association (2010-13). She is an international speaker and workshop leader at Drama conferences across the world, most recently in Uruguay, Argentina, Australia, Singapore and Turkey. Patrice has also works as a local authority School Improvement Partner, Ofsted Inspector, Primary Headteacher, National Curriculum Consultant and is a published author of many books on Drama for learning. Patrice also worked as a BBC Education Drama series consultant and scriptwriter. She now owns her own CPD and School Improvement business, organising courses and conferences for schools on the whole curriculum.

Website: www.patricebaldwin.com

Drama Blog: www.patricebaldwin.me

Email: patrice@patricebaldwin.com