

# developing theatre writing

documentation of 4 days of workshop demonstrations, panel debates and masterclasses at the national theatre studio.

20 snapshots showing the diversity of new writing development in the UK in the 1990s

edited by jonathan meth

£4.50



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## Preface

A couple of years ago it occurred to me that the theatre I worked for, the Soho Theatre Company, were routinely running a handful of workshops every week for new and developing writers. This shouldn't have surprised me, after all, it was a central plank of company policy to do so and as their Literary Manager I had set up a number of them and was responsible for inviting other groups to the Cockpit (where Soho was then based). What was surprising was the sudden realisation that apart from those sessions I ran myself, I had little or no idea quite what was taking place in those workshops. I knew who they were and when to expect them: Pat Read's open access group, Allcomers and the gay and lesbian group GLINT met weekly: Sphinx's women's workshop and Bonnie Greer's Black writers' workshop came fortnightly - and naturally I would periodically pop in to see them as well as attend any showings they might arrange. But what I did not know was the process that the writers in these groups underwent.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that, in all probability, my experience at the Cockpit was that of London as a whole. Throughout the 80s workshoping plays had become a cottage industry as writers' groups mushroomed around the capital to accommodate the needs of new playwrights. Yet no-one, except the writers attending, knew what happened in them.

Actually, this is less surprising than you might at first imagine. The rehearsal room is a rather private place, necessarily a safe haven where actors can feel free to explore a text and their characters. In the same way a writers workshop is a place where writers expose themselves and their work to scrutiny. Not surprising then that admittance to the workshop is confined to those participating and the workshop leader responsible for organising it.

But if this state of affairs was understandable, it wasn't necessarily desirable. After all, as a Literary manager on the look out for good plays, I was curious to know what was happening to them in countless rooms dotted around London. Were the writers getting the right advice? Indeed is there such a thing as the right advice? And if so, what is it and more to the point, how many people know what it is?

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that the plight of the workshop leader was not unlike that of the trainee director. Unless you have undertaken one of the rare postgraduate training courses that exist, the only way you can learn to be a director is to assist someone who knows what they are doing, because that's the only way you can gain access to that safe haven, the rehearsal room. So too, I presumed for the workshop leader.

In fact the situation for workshop leaders is worse, for at the moment, the new programme at Central School aside, there are no courses in dramaturgy in this country (unlike in the USA where the post of dramaturg is widely recognised). For the would-be teacher there seemed to be few or no opportunities to learn at the hands of others. Nevertheless, it seemed perverse that these artists didn't have the opportunity to at least share some of their knowledge with fellow practitioners.

From these late-night musings came a thought: why not ring New Playwrights Trust (NPT). So I did, and thankfully Jonathan Meth didn't think my idea just the ravings of a played out Literary Manager fretting that dramatic masterpieces were being man-

handled into formula mush. Tony Craze, Theatre Writing Associate at the London Arts Board, shared his enthusiasm. It was agreed that an opportunity for workshop leaders to share professional practice, might well go some way to fill the vacuum that we all felt existed. The first thing to do was elicit a response from those practitioners, which NPT agreed to do.

Just as we were getting excited about all of this, two things happened. I joined the National Theatre and, more importantly, Soho Theatre Company were inexplicably evicted from the Cockpit, the then natural home for such a gathering. Time passed, but the idea wouldn't go away, largely owing to the energies of Jonathan and Tony who met regularly to thrash out the details of the proposed event. After many meetings with NPT and LAB to discuss the familiar subjects of funding, venues and the like, the project one thing: a home. Then, earlier in the year, the Royal National Theatre Studio decided to step into the breach. They agreed to part-fund and host a four-day conference event entitled *Developing Theatre Writing*.

Like all the participants, who numbered almost a hundred, I am enormously grateful to the studio for their support in making this possible. Thanks to them and the NPT's support from the Idlewild Trust, we were able to bring together a broad range of playwrights groups, new writing companies and senior professionals to offer masterclasses, to consider for four days quite how plays are made and how this can be taught and explored.

What follows is a brief account of what we found.

**Jack Bradley**

## Introduction

"A couple of generations of would-be chair-makers have produced a vast array of bean bag seats. Without any guidance within their trade, they learned from the only instructive form available: the television. If any one thing characterised the new writing of the 80's it was the short-scene episodic "naturalism" of the TV. For writers with no wider sense of influences this has been disastrous".

Writing in The Guardian last year the playwright and dramaturg Noel Greig continued: " Rigourous, supportive and nourishing dramaturgy should take place - how many theatres have a head of department who is solely responsible for working with writers?" Perhaps with Arts For Everyone, the new Lottery fund, that situation could be about to change.

At the same time, though theatres and Literary Managers want high quality new work, they reject 95% of material submitted. To generate (fewer), better plays, NPT has become increasingly aware of a clear need for more effective dramaturgical methods. Workshops are designed in part to address this need, via the practical development of work with writers of experience and promise. Different approaches to this process are taken by various Literary Managers and workshop leaders. There is a school of thought which states unless there's a director and production slot, all work on a script is academic. The playwright Winsome Pinnock has asserted that the wealth established from participation in a workshop would have been useless had she not already found her voice. However, amid this diversity of opinion, there had never been an opportunity for practitioners to come together to exchange working methodologies.

Interest among Literary Managers for such an event was first expressed following the seminar 'Imagine a Map...' held at the Cochrane in 1993, in which processes by which plays might be produced were examined. Together with Jack Bradley and Tony Craze, NPT wanted to bring together writers and workshop leaders with a focus on the exchange of practical workshop experience and technique. The aim of **Developing Theatre Writing** was not to produce any definitive method, but to skillshare, to develop knowledge of professional workshop practice. At the same time, we felt it important that writers were given the opportunity to participate directly in any skills exchange, so that they could inform the processes from a direct, hands-on point of view. The intention was that through practical exchange both workshop leaders and writers would be stimulated to incorporate elements into their own working practice which they considered appropriate.

Some gave actual workshops in real time. Others provided a reflection on what it is that they do. Rather than staged and pre-rehearsed, those workshops given in real time operated in such a way as to offer direct access to participants, in order to best evaluate methodology out of practice. This was possible because participants were targeted from practitioners and those writers then in development. In order to secure a breadth of experience, some workshop leaders not engaged at that time in leading a particular programme, were invited to report on their work. These sessions were further complemented by panels on mentoring and one-on-one dramaturgy, and master-classes. The Plenary discussion which concluded the event focused on what had emerged from the practical sessions, highlighting concerns for the future.

A brief word on the documentation. Each session was documented by one of a team

of five - John Deeney, now Lecturer in Theatre Studies at the University of Ulster in Coleraine; Kath Mattock, freelance director; Simon Taylor actor, and script reader for the RNT; Ruth Ben Tovim, Artistic Director of Louder than Words, and myself. Owing to the range in form and content across the twenty sessions the documentors' methods of recording each workshop or panel discussion during the observation process naturally varied. Focusing on simplicity and an accurate record of what happened, the documentor has resisted critical intervention, or relating what happened within a session to a broader context. In editing I have at times had to condense their material while endeavouring to retain the essence of each session. My thanks go to all the documentors; Tony Craze and Jack Bradley for helping to make the project happen; Sue Higginson, Diane Borger and Gaynor MacFarland and all at the RNT Studio and the Idlewild Trust.

## 1. Writers Groups

**Jack Bradley's** session is designed as an introduction to a longer course, and was structured to enable those new to one another to share their collective knowledge and experience. Ideally, the session should be with a small group of experienced writers who have already completed a play, as a prelude to a series of workshops designed to examine in detail the other elements of craft, such as plot, character, dialogue etc.

**Shaun Prendergast's** writing group in the Paines Plough course, were six weeks into an eight week programme designed for beginners in stage writing. - The workshop operates as a service and a facility, rather than a hothouse approach to producing work and writers specifically for Paines Plough.

**Paul Sirett** leads a Stage One workshop, as held at the Soho Theatre. The exercise set for the day looks at structuring a play, with the emphasis not on the quality of the writing produced, but rather on the twists and turns of the structure which would be revealed.

Playwright **Ian Heggie** sets out to outline a practice he has developed which uses improvisation to stimulate and focus the writing process. He feels that the danger with many inexperienced writers is that their work is reflective rather than active. As an actor he identifies a place for practical work that begins long before rehearsals start.

**Robin Hooper** draws on his experience of working with younger writers, primarily during his time as Literary Manager with Paines Plough. Counselling a small group of writers about them and their work, he believes that if you take on the work, you take on the writer. What follows are two exercises, and some observations on process.

**Bernard Kops** and **Tom Ryan** are both experienced writers, Bernard with many years of writing in all media, Tom with a background in play reading, teaching and writing. They work with writers in workshop over a longer period of time. Interested in methods of teaching drawing and painting, and how these might be adapted, this has led them to an approach to teaching playwriting based on the relationship between the creative right brain and the analytical left brain.

## 2. One-to-One Dramaturgy

The Panel Discussion on One-to-One Dramaturgy with Literary Managers **Joanne Reardon** (The Bush) **Ben Jancovich** (Hampstead), and playwrights **Steve Gooch**, **April de Angelis** and **Lucinda Coxon** has the panellists outline the purpose and benefits, as they see them, of a one-to-one meeting between a writer and a dramaturg or Literary Manager

**Myra Brenner** has many years experience working in the US and UK. As a dramaturg she has worked on projects for Talawa and the New Playwrights Trust. She has been Senior Script Associate at Theatre Royal Stratford East for the past six years. **David Zaman** graduated from the MA in Playwriting Studies at Birmingham University in 1993 and is currently under commission to Theatre Royal Stratford East. Myra and David had met for several sessions prior to this demonstration. Their session takes a script in progress as a platform to reveal more general issues and considerations surrounding one to one dramaturgy.

**Vicky Ireland** runs workshops at Polka Theatre for Young People, because with a 3 week rehearsal process, this is the best way she finds to support playwriting - less rehearsal time is spent restructuring plays, if workshops are used as part of the drafting process.

**Cheryl Robson** outlines her own preferred way of working one-to-one, in a private space with a set time, and setting clear, realisable objectives for the next session, offering empathy, positive attention and a non-judgemental attitude to the writer and his/her work.

**Sue Parrish** sets the context and recaps on the work of the Sphinx, before handing over to current colleagues. **Bryony Lavery** presents for our questioning consideration an adaptation of a book : 'The Writers' Journey', by Christopher Vogler, which sets out for writers how to structure their work. The book's premise is that there is a certain way of telling all stories - mythic structure for storytellers and screenwriters: 'the hero's journey'

Mindful of the context of the 4 days, **Annie Castledine** gets personal. Out of an M&S bag she produces certain objects to create elements of a sort of stream of consciousness - out of which perhaps emerges a narrative - experimenting with form, to enable a practical understanding of the importance of structure.

## 3. Different Approaches

**Phelim McDermott** explains that not only has improvisation informed all of his performing and directing work of the last few years, but also that there is one improvisation exercise that seems to cover everything.

**Ruth Ben Tovim** is the Artistic Director of Louder Than Words, a company concerned with the relationship between 'the visual' and 'the text' in live art based practice. She asks what writers can offer, other than a stage direction, which acts as something integral to the way a piece is visually received? This exercise, developing over 5 phas-

es, explores the possibility of how an 'instruction' can create an idea or an image.

**Tim Etchells** is one of the founder members of Forced Entertainment, a Sheffield based company who have been working as an ensemble for 12 years. Tim writes text but not the show. The idea of a gap between the character and a piece of language which they are attempting to use is a key aspect of Forced Ent's work. This distance has led to text being able to be viewed as a physical object with a history and context of its own, separate from the character which uses it. He introduces the idea of thinking about text as a 'quotation' - a second hand object.

**Ian Spink's** background is originally in ballet, then in Contemporary Dance. He has worked with Tim Albery and Anthony MacDonald, and also with Joint Stock and writers such as Caryl Churchill and David Lan. He devises theatre work, has contact with different disciplines, and is most interested in the territory between forms. Coming from dance to text, Ian asks, "How can a hidden agenda or a series of processes be communicated? Working from structured improvisations, will an audience know if the journey hasn't been travelled?"

**Bonnie Greer** has worked in the USA & UK in a wide range of contexts and in particular with Black playwrights, women playwrights and to develop Black writing. Following the Black Voices for the New Millennium scheme, here Bonnie explores the possibilities of a codification of black dramaturgy. (A fuller account of her exploration of this area here can be found in *Going Black Under the Skin*, available from NPT)

**Angela Kelly** discusses *Write Now*, the recent Half Moon Young People's Theatre ten week writers course, which aims to provide an access point for those young writers interested in pursuing a professional career in theatre. **Chris Preston**, **Sita Ramamurthy** and **Suzy Gilmour** offer an insight into possible approaches to playwriting in schools based on Maya Production's 1995 *Outwrite* project in East London.

The Panel Discussion on Mentoring with directors **Margaret Sheehy**, **Marina Caldarone**, **Olusola Oyeleye**, and playwrights **Maureen Lawrence** and **Jackie Everett**, is introduced by director **Astrid Hilne** who highlights the usefulness and importance of Women's Theatre Workshop (WTW) and the New Playwrights Trust (NPT) working together through their respective Mentoring Schemes for Women Directors and Women Writers.

**Richard Shannon**, from Independent Radio Drama Productions and **Jeremy Mortimer**, from BBC Radio 4 provide a session designed as a stimulus for writers new to radio.

**David Edgar** has for seven years been Chair of the MA in Playwriting Studies at the University of Birmingham, the first course of its kind in this country. This session draws from the foundation element to that course and provides a detailed introduction about plays and scenes and, more specifically, about devices.

Jonathan Meth 1996

# 1. Writers Groups

## **Jack Bradley**

**Aristotle or Bust?** *Or, did we really know all that?*

Type of session: workshop

### The User Group

*Designed as a introductory session to a longer course, it is structured to enable those new to one another to share their collective knowledge and experience. Ideally, this should be with a small group of experienced writers (Jack has usually done this session with people who have already completed a play, as a prelude to a series of workshops designed to examine in detail the other elements of craft, such as plot, character, dialogue etc.)*

The formal version of this session was provided by Jack in written form. The actual session concentrated primarily on a large group of people brainstorming, so what follows reflects that process.

### Approach

*The starting point is the belief that given the volume of dramatic stories told to us, we are a highly sophisticated audience. However we rarely articulate - even to ourselves - the dramatic assumptions we make when we are watching drama, be it in a theatre, on television or at the cinema. But, whether we are talking about soap opera or Greek drama, there are common roots to storytelling.*

*The purpose is to remind ourselves what we already know about dramatic storytelling, in particular, those elements which appear to recur in a variety of forms throughout history. In doing so, it hopefully raises the question whether those elements that do seem to recur still hold true and if so, why.*

Jack posed a series of questions 'to surprise and liberate.' "We are sophisticated storytellers, but to what extent are these tenets deeply buried? And do ancient rules still apply?" He felt this would be an appropriate starting point for the 4 days sharing workshop skills, though he noted that the optimum number for a workshop group of this kind would normally be 6 - 12, rather than 43 people packed into the room. These were divided into 7 cluster groups of 6 .

### The Format

*Working in small groups, participants are invited to "get back to basics" to identify the essential ingredients of play making. The ideas should be pooled and written down by someone in the group. At the end of each stage the ideas are displayed for discussion. Thus the group are asked to list:*

- a) *The ingredients of theatre*
- b) *Themes commonly found in drama*
- c) *Characters that recur*
- d) *Genres*

e) *Familiar scenes - or those inter-active moments that we all recognise (eg the love scene, the confrontation scene, etc)*

The groups were asked to brainstorm to make explicit what they already knew; making conscious the things that are taken for granted. The groups were asked to take 2-3 minutes to list:

### **what are the essential ingredients of drama ?**

(In fact this took 15 minutes). Communal lists were then created on large sheets of paper blu-tacked to the wall.

*performer, space, audience, story, conflict, harmony, truth, the human condition, illusion, emotional engagement, journey, entertainment, questions asked, escapism, return, nothing given, subversion, laughter (at the gods), manipulation of bodies in space....The audience must want to sleep with at least 1 member of the cast. The dilemma itself need not be huge, but acts as a trigger to a more important situation; suspense, surprise and plausibility; telling and withholding; raising the stakes within the bounds of the plausible; reintegration of material; legerdemain - slight of hand; the author's manipulation of the audience, image, crisis, catharsis, style, context, universality The basics are space, actors, audience, story All stories are transactions between people; connecting with the ethos of a particular world; human beings at a live event; audience as recipients; interactive process; spectacle, story, ritual, relationship between theatre and society Is this worth my time? Do I care enough ? Inner conflict, a character at war with self, family and society; semantics; language, means of expression, sound text, music poetry, performance, journey, imagery, action, issues, conflict, discourse, opinion; desires, conflict, action, decision to pre-arrange, originator, concept, cheque book; casting a spell, multi-sensory, conspiracy, collaboration, performer/audience contract; anticipation, event, trigger, aftermath, cyclical, building blocks to larger crisis (image of a string of pearls).*

Jack then asked:

### **what are plays about ? (themes)**

*Boy meets girl (love); thwarted, unrequited and other love; power; individual v. establishment, individual v gods, individual v himself; good and evil; families, disguise; moral improvements; desire, crisis, life and death; revenge; alienation; shame / guilt; moral choices (gradations of behaviour); ambition, betrayal; fate; (dis)order; morality, desire; loss, recovery; change, redemption, spirituality; the search for truth; self-awareness, money, war; politics; oppression; childhood; rites of passage; identity; beauty; aspiration; quest; innocence; youth / age; old / new; growth; violence; conflict between surface and real; ideology; heroism; entrapment, deception, status, power, ambition; obsession, survival, glory; work and hope.... whatever is contemporary and building towards the future for the protagonist; the thing, the pursuit of that thing and the consequence of that thing*

### **what are the genres in which these take place ?**

*tragedy, burlesque, thriller, epic, melodrama, farce, kitchen sink, boulevard, agit-prop, comedy (black, comedy of manners, music hall, absurd, verbatim / oral, pantomime, commedia dell'arte, mysteries, folk, existentialist, romance, docu-drama, verse, mime, expressionism; grand guignol, street, kabuki, noh.....*

## what are the characters you regularly come across?

*temptress, unfaithful lover, confidante (s)hero, corpse, ghost / spirit, (wise) fool, conformist, pariah, witness, coward, victim, malcontent, ruler, mystic / prophet, messenger, plain dealer, stranger, rake, holy man, gatekeeper*

## what are the key familiar scenes or interactive moments ?

*the message; the love scene (seduction) ; the death scene; revelation; arrival of a letter; bribe; confession; information revealed; final showdown; trial; misunderstanding; visitation; execution; curse; conspiracy; confrontation; reconciliation; moment of disguise; moment of self sacrifice; transformation; arrival of stranger; homecoming; betrayal; the pay off.*

## Conclusion

What should usually happen at this stage is that working in pairs, writers would choose a number of the elements from the sections featured and combine them to create a storyline. There was no time to actually try out the writing process in pairs, but what Jack finds is quickly evident is that writers cannot work within strict confines - "as you start adding, the play breaks out of the deconstructed formula. This then suggests the asking of questions which allow the lists to function descriptively rather than prescriptively - to examine if the writer is breaking the rules and why. What emerges from the exercise is a potted history of devices and techniques belonging to the cannon of Western theatre writing."

Finally, Jack offered us a teaser: "if there is innovation beyond the bounds of what is shared, will it be understood?" (A foreign language).....

# **Paines Plough**

**Shaun Prendergast** leads a group of playwrights.

Type of session - workshop

## **Introduction**

Shaun began by introducing himself and quickly outlining his career in writing, for stage and screen. He then introduced the playwrights who had joined him, participants in the Paines Plough course, six weeks into an eight week programme designed for beginners in stage writing. This class was a service and a facility, and not a hothouse approach to producing work and writers specifically for Paines Plough. An insight into the methods used in the classes was followed by readings from the work that had been produced.

## **Approach**

The basic procedure in a class is to read and comment on each other's work, with the emphasis on exploration rather than criticism. This is in the context of the understanding, made very clear by Shaun, that there is no disgrace in writing bad material. Within the classes, success is never a criterion. This is not just because the classes can just as well be regarded as an exercise, as a process leading to a finished product. It is also because, as Shaun succinctly put it, writing something is better than writing nothing. The reading of unfinished, unpolished work is an important part of the process. It tackles the early need for demystification of the business of writing, and helps also to underline the point that a script is not a play but a plan. Shaun said that a script is really a series of notes to help others achieve your fantasy, and a writer should always acknowledge the fact that director, designer, actors and audience have yet to make their contribution.

## **Exercises**

These are the assumptions which lie behind the early exercises. Shaun explained that he sometimes asked participants to write gibberish, just to free them up. He also summarised two other exercises that he uses before work on a particular project begins. The first is to ask each participant to write 30 words about themselves, and then afterwards to edit that down to just 20. This is to show that words are there to be adjusted, and can always be cut. Another exercise consists of isolating any small section of dialogue, and changing its context. to show how circumstances can heighten an exchange independently of the content.

Once work starts on specific scenes, which may or may not be leading towards a finished piece, Shaun asks the writers what they want to write about. The writers present on this occasion had chosen themes such as possession, loyalty, twins, parents and kids, and puppy love.

Shaun basically endorsed the principle of writing about what you know, but emphasised that this did not mean that everything you write should be strictly autobiographical. His general rule was that 'you would write best about what you would fight best about'. He linked this to the freedom a writer has to set his or her play wherever they want. Because a stage can be anywhere, a play can quite happily be set on the moon. One of the scenes that was read to us later involved dialogue from a boy

of just three or four years old. Asked if problems of casting would be a worry, the writer said that Shaun had encouraged her to leave such production problems to the director, whose job it would be to realise her fantasy.

Concerning structure, Shaun said that any one that works is good, adding that the traditional tripartite model of thesis, antithesis and synthesis is perhaps the most helpful to observe as a starting point. Early on in the classes he gets his writers to construct a map of their play, in whatever form suits them, according to the same 'dirtying the page' principle. In other words, it should not be seen as binding, and can easily be discarded later, but it at least provides a football to kick around in discussion. In addition, many of the plans had a rugby ball shape, with two thin ends of exposition and resolution, and a thicker mass of events in the middle.

Shaun suggested the conventional format of a sub-plot reinforcing the themes of the main plot, and approaching them from a slightly different angle, as a sound one. As far as the writing process itself is concerned, Shaun underlined the importance of not necessarily working on scenes in chronological order.

Shaun said that his experience as an actor had informed his approach to work on characters. He asked writers to write down one hundred things about each of their main characters. The results, some of which were read to us, took different forms, from life histories and lists of attributes to impressionistic prose poems. All, said Shaun, could be equally useful in helping a writer find out more about his or her characters.

Finally, some scenes were read for us, as usual by and for the writers themselves. Some of the scenes had been worked on as part of a projected whole since the first day, while others had been started from scratch the night before. Settings ranged from a flat late at night after a trip to a night club, to a shattered home in Sarajevo. In a normal class, each piece would then be discussed amongst the whole group, in an atmosphere which, even in the artificial context of this workshop, seemed genuinely supportive.

## **Paul Sirett.**

### **Stage One Writers' Workshop**

Type of session - workshop

#### **Introduction**

At the outset Paul explained that we would in effect be witnessing a Stage One workshop, as held at the Soho Theatre. The writers, sat around a table in the middle of the room, would be set an exercise, and we would first observe, and then listen to the results at the end. Paul encouraged observers to move in and out of the room as they wished during the initial writing or 'goldfish bowl' phase, and to keep conversation to a minimum to aid the concentration of the participating writers.

There were five writers, all from the first stage group, designed for relative newcomers who may have one or two plays behind them. Workshop sessions usually focus on one particular element of the playwright's craft (eg character development) with an exercise designed not to produce a finished play / scene, or even to build on a piece of work in progress, but simply to isolate and examine that element. The exercise set for today would look at structuring a play, with the emphasis not on the quality of the writing produced, but rather on the twists and turns of the structure which would be revealed.

#### **The Exercise**

The writers would each be asked to write in ninety minutes a five-page play with the structure of a full length piece. Paul had taken five well-known, successful plays, from the Greeks to the present day, and condensed them into a five-stage summary of their structure, using headings such as exposition, revelation, conflict, obstacle and resolution (see attached sheet). The writers were given one play-skeleton each, but they were not told which play it had been condensed from, and it was read out to them stage by stage, with no prior knowledge of what the next stage would demand. Ten minutes were allowed to complete each stage, which should be between one and two pages long. They were told that the actors available were one male and one female, both 20's/30's. The watchword they were encouraged to keep at the back of their minds was subtlety, so that the movement from stage to stage of the structure should be smooth and inconspicuous.

The observers received copies of the summaries, and thanks to the author / play title initials at the top of each page, could attempt a guess at the identity of the original plays. These were not to be divulged to the writers.

The first element of each play's structure was exposition, the revelation of who the characters are, where they are, and what they are up to. Paul explained that the practice of exposition is not as frightening as it sounds, and need not involve the elaboration of an intricate 'back-plot' for the characters. Any action or event amounts to exposition if it helps illuminate the simple 'who, where and what' of a play's opening.

#### **Sample Instruction**

1. *Exposition* - Who are these people? Where are they ? What's going on ?  
*Revelation* - Something has happened in the past - an unsolved mystery.

*Goal* - To solve this mystery

2. *Obstacle* - something that gets in the way of solving the mystery

*Complication* - arising out of the attempt to solve the mystery

3. *Confrontation* - arising out of complication.

*Conflict* - arising out of confrontation.

4. *False resolution* - The mystery seems to have been solved.

*Revelation* - The truth

5. *Catharsis* - The result of discovering the truth.

*Resolution* - the result of the catharsis

*Oedipus / Sophocles*

## The Results

The plays /scenes that had been produced after the hour or so of writing time were read for us by two actors, and at this stage the identity of the original plays was revealed. They were: *Oedipus*, *Hamlet*, *View From the Bridge*, *Oleanna* and *Dealer's Choice*. Remarkably, from the Dealer's Choice structure, a scene about gambling losses had emerged. It was commented on that although the writers had been working blind to a prescribed pattern, the characters did not give the impression of having been made to jump through hoops to fulfil the demands of the structure. Neither was that structure so obvious that the results moved creakily from stage to stage.

Paul explained that the next element of a workshop would be to discuss comparisons to the full-length originals, and that in a subsequent second stage session the results of this exercise could be used as a helpful reference point for the writer's full-length work. He also outlined an alternative workshop format, in which elements of the plays' structure are written on individual cards, shuffled around on a table, and the experimental scene has to be plotted around the random combination of twists that emerges that way. He emphasised that the condensed structures were not meant to be prescriptive formulas. It was rather a question of learning as much as possible from the observation that good plays, both old and new, when distilled down to their structure alone, take on a similar form, with the words confrontation, conflict, crisis and catharsis appearing very frequently.

## Discussion

Nevertheless, the discussion afterwards centred around the question of whether the approach we had seen was not a rather imposed way of teaching about structure, and one which risked making something which should be a helpful tool feel instead like limiting shackles. There are, after all, plenty of good plays which display alternative systems of structure, such as *Top Girls* and *Waiting for Godot*. In response, Paul acknowledged that there are many aberrations from the norm, but that in the learning process consensus is more interesting than divergence. Further on in that process, breaking of the rules is encouraged, but at this early stage a more formulaic exploration of structure helps to demystify it. Comparisons were made to scales in music and to the discipline of spelling: they are skills acquired early on which need not be consciously applied or strictly imposed in order to be useful.

Paul noted that the workshop format is not suited to everyone, and whereas some writers bring a certain quality of writing to their work which then needs knocking into

shape, others have a more instinctive feel for questions of structure.

The writers themselves found the limitations imposed by the exercise to be a challenge, but there was also a freedom in the knowledge that neither characterisation, nor plot, nor any other aspect of the content was the centre of attention, but only the structure, and that not for itself but as a tool for subsequent analysis. In order to assess in full the effectiveness of this workshop, it would be necessary to witness that next stage, and see how the material produced here came into use later.

Finally the participants were thanked, and it was agreed that the writers, some of whom had never worked with Paul before, had been very courageous in exposing their work to such scrutiny.

# Ian Heggie

## Writing Action

Type of Session: Master class

Level: Skills are applicable to experienced as well as inexperienced writers

### Introduction

Ian set out to outline a practice he has developed which uses improvisation to stimulate and focus the writing process. As an ex-actor he identified a place for practical work that begins long before rehearsals start. He feels that the danger with many inexperienced writers is that their work is reflective rather than active. An actor can quickly spot such flaws and is acutely aware when something is essentially non-dramatic. Ian defines a playwright as somebody who 'gives the actor something to do.' Therefore the playwright's most basic challenge is how to make characters active.

### Topic

The group was asked to pick a topic and came up with the National Lottery. Why was this a potentially good subject? It provided scope for:

- Universal obsession
- Moral reflection
- Individual story, what happens to you?

In order to make this a piece of drama, the characters have to 'move' or 'travel' through the play. The writers' first question must therefore be centred on the characters' needs and desires.

Ian highlighted the common misconception that characters have to achieve their targets by the end of the play. Often failure to do so, or their ability to achieve something completely different from that which they set out to achieve, is far more dramatically satisfying. Perhaps they were never really aware of what they wanted in the first place.

### Character and Plot

The next questions were:

- How do character and plot inform each other?
- How can a playwright keep pressure on a character to maintain and develop his motivation?"

Ian suggests that the crucial link is between the practical and moral obstacles facing the character and the character himself. What could be more dramatic than providing a necessary course of action to a reflective character ie Hamlet? Here there is no absolute resolution, only half solutions are offered. The drama is a dilemma in which the character is inextricably trapped and to which there is no easy solution.

Ian provided a couple of examples to demonstrate the importance of 'grading' the difficulty of the action in accordance with the nature of the character. When one walks past a tramp begging for money, is there an ultimate resolution? Some may find it

easy to give and dismiss the situation, others may not. Somewhere here there is a response and unresolvable dilemma which goes beyond logic and digs deeper than conscious intelligence, to touch upon the whole self. Similarly if a character needs £10, how easy will it be for that character to achieve that action? It may be more acceptable for one character to steal the money than ask for it. When the action is small for the character, but large for an audience (rape, murder, theft) the drama is heightened. The gap between the character's desires and the end state creates the 'problem' area in which drama can take place.

*At this point a short semantic debate took place over the use of the word 'problem'. One participant thought that 'opportunity' was a more acceptable term, but ultimately agreement was reached that the crucial factor was the existence of a dilemma, which when allied with the character's action could produce negative or positive outcomes. There was also a discussion about the relationship between content and structure. Ian agreed that an understanding of the possibilities of theatrical structure was important, but firmly advocated that the two are indivisible. If the writer is concentrating on telling a story with their own voice there is something innate in the way that the structure consciously and unconsciously feeds content and vice versa.*

Moving on to the practical use of improvisation techniques, Ian pointed out the similarities between characters in a scene and actors in an improvisation. Characters know some things, but not others, they share common knowledge with the other characters and carry private information. Sometimes they are unaware of what they really want out of a situation, on other occasions they know exactly what it is. Either way, they try to gain this by direct or indirect methods. Like actors in impro they are often unaware of coming obstacles (ie possible solutions), but do have a scene objective (ie motivation).

## **Motivation**

Ian asks his writers to write short scene treatments or 'specifications' in which these questions must be addressed

- What does each character want to achieve in the scene?
- Do they know what they really want?
- Are they using a direct or indirect method to achieve their aims?

This exercise should be completed bearing in mind the earlier thoughts about character and pressure. Characters can be graded on levels of necessity and the extremes of behaviour they will adopt in order to achieve their ambition. The writer can add time and location pressures to heighten the stakes and stop the action becoming circular.

He next asked the group to write their own specifications using two characters, A and B. Both want something from each other and also from C, due to appear in the next scene. When possible scenes were read out, it became clear how this method could not only provide a scene with solid foundations, but also provoke an infinite amount of solutions and half solutions. Once given to actors to digest and improvise with, Ian explained how the process could be stage managed by the writers. They could give information to one character and not the other, announce the sudden arrival of another character, change the weather conditions etc Through this highly structured exercise the actors are then free to play with the dramatic potential of the situation. Loopholes become clearer and new departures present themselves. Most importantly it keeps the work focused on action not reflection, with the writer constantly clarifying

intention for the actor rather than describing the situation.

## **Structure**

It also became apparent how this could help with overall structure. A couple of the groups' examples suffered from dramatic congestion with far too much crammed into one scene. The exercise forces the writer to clarify the scene objective as separate from the superobjective and allows the writing to stay clean and sharp.

Ian doesn't recommend the taping of improvisation sessions. They are not used to produce brilliant new dialogue which the writer can simply transcribe. Instead they show whether the bones of the drama are working and spark new ideas and departures via the inventiveness of the actors.

This process can be used with any level of writer and at any stage during the process of producing a play. The more familiar the actors become with the method, the more complex the specifications can become. The writer can play freely with direct and indirect approaches and how they inform the theatricality of the piece. For example Jacobean drama is open in its announced objective, the world of Pinter is infused with hidden motive.

## **Discussion**

*The session finished with a general discussion about current trends in theatre. Ian felt that because of the influence of imported European work in Glasgow, there was a 'sound and light' craze taking place in Scottish theatre. Simultaneously the influence of television was weakening the vocal and physical range of some Scottish actors. However he did concede that funding was strong for touring theatre and that many people find it easier to get work on and seen in Scotland because the theatrical community is considerably smaller than in other areas. Similarly there was an encouraging growth in new writing, in particular the emerging strength of fresh young voices.*

## **Conclusion**

The method Ian outlined was simple and flexible yet allowed for complexity to emerge from the improvisational work. It removes the writer temporarily from the task of dialogue and holds the writing up from the page in a three dimensional context. There is also no glib separation between structure and content. If the drama is truly active, they are one in the same thing.

# **Robin Hooper**

## **What I do with new playwrights**

Type of session - master class

### **Introduction**

Robin drew on his experience of working with younger writers, primarily during his time as Literary Manager with Paines Plough. Counselling a small group of writers about them and their work, he believes that if you take on the work, you take on the writer. What follows are two exercises, and some observations on process.

### **Exercises**

#### **1. Greek / Animal**

*This exercise involves the release or exploration of feeling for both the audience and the writer.*

The origins of Greek drama lie in ritual . A shaman or elected priest then became the actor figure, then the writer. The material of Greek drama is often routed in dysfunctional families. Abroad writers have no problem with this exercise, but in England...The aim is to counter the academic and the literary - that writers should think less and feel more; to get writers to sing and dance to physically transport and get them away from the desk. (Actors do this kind of work all the time)

#### ***The Family***

Three things Dad said which fucked you up. Three things Mum said which fucked you up. Three things Dad said which made you feel great. Three things Mum said which made you feel great. If you have a brother three things you hate about him. If you have a sister three things you hate about her. If you have a brother three things you love about him. If you have a sister three things you love about her. If you are an only child three things you hated about this. If you are an only child three things you loved about this.

#### ***Violence***

Three occasions when you have been hit. Three occasions when you hit someone.

#### ***The Outside world***

What animal terrifies you? What animal do you love best of all? What animal attacked you in some way? What animal did you attack in some way? What in the city do you like? What in the city do you hate? What in the country do you like? What in the country do you hate?

#### ***Song & Dance***

What is your favourite song/tune/piece of music? What do you associate with it? What is your favourite dance What do you associate with it?

## 2. The Kimono

*This might be the last of 9, 3-hour sessions*

A perfectly respectable, rather conservative Japanese middle class couple have a daughter who becomes a celebrated and controversial photographer. Her work, political beliefs and sense of adventure take her to the war in Afghanistan, where she is shot and killed. Her mother, with her husband, close relatives and friends, travel to Afghanistan, carrying an ornate bridal kimono which her mother had made herself over the years, and which was obviously intended for the daughter's marriage. When they reach the spot where the girl was killed and buried, her remains are lifted and ceremoniously dressed in the beautiful kimono. She is then returned to her grave.

Is this a true story? What do you think? What truthful elements does it have in it? What fictional? What do you like about it? What do you dislike?

Read through the story a few times and suggest alternative aspects and details, to suit your interests and feelings. Be as instinctive as possible, but remember, for instance, that if you lose the Japanese nationality of the couple, you might take away the sense of ritual. Take some time over this, and write down your reasons for changing things.

Consider the following and write down reasons and motivations:

Do you think the girl ran away or was running away from something through her work, if so why?

Why did the mother make the kimono in the first place?

Why was it necessary for her to take the kimono to the corpse of her daughter and dress her in it? Write a speech for her explaining her motives. If you've made a change here, then do your alternative. If you've cut the mother figure, you'll have a lot of explaining to do.

Why did the one particular family friend weep and weep?

Why was the father not weeping so much?

Why did the daughter, or maybe your alternative, become the thing she became. In the case of the story above, a war photographer (ie dangerous, filthy, shocking work....) Write a shortish monologue for this character.

### General Dramaturgy

#### Stable and the making of plays

##### *6 writers / 10 sessions*

Every Sunday evening writers would meet at Robin's flat - a small comfortable space. After the 10 week period, they would write for 2 months, then meet again for 1 to 1 sessions, then submit to Paines Plough, then rehearsed readings. This was to give the writers a fixed goal, an invited audience. They would then hopefully get picked up for production

Robin's main areas of interest are: Realising the particular voice of the writer; the audience; story and the play making process from it

These are as a result of the following responses to new plays: I do not understand what the play is about I do not care about the characters The work is a screenplay, a staged libretto, a radio play or it would make a good novel, but it is not a stage play.

...and the playwrights saying "I don't know how I'm going to do it".

### ***Pre-text work***

Robin focuses on starting points : talking to the writers : recognising talent and discipline : encouraging the urgency to see plays ; asking "what is the writer trying to say?" Robin believes writing is expressing what you are and who you are. Focusing in on what a writer does best, the sort of play a writer likes best might not be the sort of play they can write (this then necessitates purging the influences). It is important to feel comfortable with an idea - it has to belong to a writer.

How to sustain the energy of discovery and excitement (eg inferior ideas replacing good ideas because the best ideas can often be the most difficult to realise): The best insights emerge away from the work place. Robin encourages the writer to write down the thought and the preparation. This replaces the urgent but sometimes dangerous need, on the part of the writer, to write dialogue too soon and give the writer a false sense of security: the "I have written dialogue' I am doing well' syndrome.

As a result Robin does not do dialogue workshops - "my play is done. I have now only to write it." He is concerned with making plays as opposed to writing them. This involves the scenario, the synopsis - writing down the story of the play, so we can see the before us where the holes might be. The ground plan of the play.

### ***Audiences***

Robin poses the question: what would you like this play to do for an audience? Writers should never undermine an audience's capacity to feel. If an audience is feeling, they will be even more receptive to ideas, thought, complications. Beyond the deep feeling of the writer is the audience's feeling.

### **Concluding observations**

It is important that the writer is looking inwards instead of outwards. The play to be written is inside the writer it is not out there somewhere. John Guare said- 'what wakes you up at 4:00 am and you choose not to go any further with - that's what you should write'.

Stephen Jeffreys runs the best workshop on structure - so Robin leaves that to those better equipped.

Energy transfer is the main benefit of the workshop

It takes the best actors and directors to work on a new play.

Writers have to confront fears about their material, learn to confront criticism and take on feedback

Having done the groundwork, the writer needs to let go and something else takes over - if the writer can gain the confidence, calmness and serenity to be moved away from the preparation and can go off into the imagination. Technical accomplishment can create that freedom....

# **Bernard Kops and Tom Ryan**

## **Writers Group**

Type of Session: workshop

### **Introduction**

Bernard Kops and Tom Ryan are both experienced writers, Kops with many years of writing in all media. Ryan with a background in play reading, teaching and writing. Kops and Ryan work with writers in workshop over a period of time (they have been working with some writers for a number of years); one of the foundations to their 'Writers Group' is a belief in playwriting as a craft, that the delivery of a fully realised script requires a period of (sometimes considerable) developmental intervention and practice.

Kops and Ryan began the session by introducing 10 members of their Writers Group (playwrights and actors, sometimes a combination of both). Most had been with the group for a year or longer, bringing with them a range of backgrounds and experiences. Each communicated that the group had catered to their particular needs, and was simultaneously able to address the work of playwrights at different stages of development.

### **Philosophy and methodology**

Bernard Kops said that he had been interested in methods of teaching drawing and painting, and how these might be adapted to playwriting. This had led Kops and Ryan to an approach to teaching playwriting based on the relationship between the creative right brain and the analytical left brain.

Kops spoke initially of the 'right brain draft', allowing writers "the opportunity of making mistakes before getting there.... (by) throwing writers into the deep area of the right brain." The instruction to writers is: "do not rewrite before the right brain draft is complete: The function of the first draft, to "uncover", is only later matrixed by the distinguishing mechanistic features of the left brain. Kops was quick to point out that this teaching method is about *how* to apply left and right brain techniques.

### **The workshop - Framework and Preparation**

The session Kops and Ryan conducted here would form a typical first part of a workshop. Imposing structure(s) on the exercise does not limit creative expression (right brain) but acknowledges playwriting as a highly complex craft with particular linked elements. For example configurations could be described as:

style + structure  
dialogue + character  
theme + story

Writing theatre means "doing" - it is all about action, space and movement as well as text.

Kops began with a simple meditation exercise. The aim of this was for the group to

achieve a similarly focused emotional state and was a means of accessing the right brain. The exercise consisted of slowing breathing, breathing through the nose and slow circular breathing.

The group was then introduced to the idea of **Rooms in a House** as a metaphorical location for different types of creative exploration. These are:

Cellar, Attic, Living Room, Room of Love and Desire, Room of Dreams and Nightmares, Playroom, Room with a View, Conservatory, Room to Anywhere, Junk Room, Games Room.

Some rooms have their meaning clearly explained, while others are less obvious. For example the cellar is the unconscious, while the Living Room is the room of deceptions and lies which presents a picture of normality. This represents the need for a text to keep the subtext submerged in the ordinary (eg Ibsen and some Strindberg)

Tom Ryan then introduced the theme of Betrayal. A group discussion on meaning and representation followed: treachery, disappointment, lie, seduction, Judas - the archetypal betrayer, the snake in the garden of Eden, self-betrayal, Chamberlain turning Czechoslovakia over to the Nazis. The word comes from the Latin "to deliver up". Specific dramatic examples would include: how the protagonist delivers up Clarence in Richard III; Constantin's betrayal by his mother in The Seagull, Peer Gynt's self-betrayal in Ibsen's play (his whole life is an illusion)

Two actors in the group then improvised two scenes around the theme "as a way in". The actors were given the specific instruction: "where were you last night?" and a scene evolved around a lover/partner not coming home and accused of having an affair. A second improvisation around an identical instruction followed, this time with the actors being asked to work towards a high dramatic climax. An important point which came out of the discussion here was how easy it is for sexual betrayal to emerge as a cliché in any theatrical / dramatic representation. A third improvisation around a child who had betrayed his father to the Department of Social Security, emerged as more layered and dramatically aware.

It was pointed out that although improvisation exercises are usually done after text has been produced in the workshop, acting work carries out particular benefits. While scripted acting carries obvious advantages to a playwright's work, improvised acting allows the playwright to further examine the crucial relationship between script and actor as an interactive creative process.

### **The Workshop - Exercise**

The following instructions were given to the participating playwrights for the construction of a short scene around the theme of betrayal. These included individuals new to the work and members of the Kops/Ryan group:

- there are two people; any combination of father, mother, son , daughter, brother, sister
- the two people inhabit different Rooms in the House
- the writer chooses the room for the 'happening or the scene' (this is usually imposed)

- a third person enters half-way through
- no more than six words are allowed to any one line or speech.

The participants were given a period of 20 minutes to complete this exercise.

Following the writing exercise each of the scenes were acted out by members of the groups and discussed.

### Outcomes / Questions

The exercise produced a range of work in terms of both style and content. Most found the discipline of only 6 words a line perhaps the most challenging.

- "you have to think carefully about which words you employ"
- "other things usually come before dialogue"
- "the reduction was a facilitation"
- "there is no time for exposition"

In response to these comments Kops made a number of points.

Playwrights are often primarily concerned with theme, but this is perhaps better addressed towards the completion of a first draft. In the exercise the Room functions as an agenda/super-objective, allowing the writer to focus on the crucial action of a scene which will itself engender the theme. Kops also asserted that words have to be earned in a play, and that it is essential not to allow them to hold up the forward momentum of the action. One point raised was that this exercise might work better for male than female characters - the short, sharp dialogue being a characteristic feature of current male-written / male-dominated plays (though playwrights such as Caryl Churchill have employed similar to good effect).

A number of the pieces presented carried an expressionistic style which was not consciously produced by the writers. Kops noted that these pieces "worked" because the exercise demonstrated how expressionism unconsciously relies on naturalism for relationships between characters.

An important question raised was: "Can these exercises lead to whole plays being created? The answer was "sometimes", but they could offer a means to an end. For example, towards *writing* the scene before and after that *scripted* in the exercise. Such an exercise might also assist a writer in seeking a solution to a particular problem.

Bernard Kops quoted Martha Graham as a guiding light - "discipline is freedom". This session explored just one exercise in the Kops/Ryan method, yet is indicative of overall and specific concerns around structure, scene development, character and dialogue - which are continually addressed in the work of their Writers Group.

~

## 2. One to One Dramaturgy

### **One to One Dramaturgy:**

Type of session - Panel Discussion

with **Joanne Reardon** (The Bush) **Ben Jancovich** (Hampstead), **Steve Gooch**, **April de Angelis** and **Lucinda Coxon**.

### Literary Managers

The five panellists began by outlining the purpose and benefits, as they saw them, of a one-to-one meeting between a writer and a dramaturg or Literary Manager (LM). Ben pointed out that such a meeting happens nearer the end of the playwriting cycle than most of the other processes being examined in these workshops: when writer and LM meet, a play is approaching performability already. From his point of view as a LM he drew a distinction between scripts which he had commissioned, and which he therefore had a right to criticise, and unsolicited work, in which case he had no special right to make critical comments. He also said that there were occasions when a LM is more redundant, because a particular piece of work needs not discussion but production. Whatever stage a particular script is at, the main concern is never the science of writing (specific and prescriptive comments are only really helpful once the play is in production) but the heart of the play in question.

### Writers

This was a sentiment echoed in various forms by most of the panellists. Steve emphasised how rare and useful the intense focus on a script at a one-to-one meeting could be. For him as a writer the main value of such a meeting was the chance to see his work as others do. A writer often finds that his or her intentions are different from the impression his work actually makes, and it was useful to encounter this problem before reaching the rehearsal room. It was agreed that a simple reading could serve the very important purpose of objectifying a piece of work. A commissioned play often sees LM and playwright coming at it from different directions, with a dramaturg's idea of the piece having obscured what's on the page. A reading gets the play "out there", making it easier to find a point of sympathy, so that both parties are talking about the same thing. Similarly, for Lucinda, the main purpose of a session in which everyone is looking to serve the play must be to create a piece of work as true to itself as possible. With that in mind, a workshop with actors would sometimes be the most helpful step, because often actors ask the kinds of questions a writer needs to be asking, and so their work may be more useful than a dramaturg's opinions.

Complementing this emphasis on the importance of building a rapport between LM and writer, April contended that many writers do have a hunger for specific knowledge of aspects of the craft (structure, rhythm etc.) and that a dramaturg's role often included offering advice in these areas.

### Discussion

#### *The role and function of the Literary Manager*

The first question from the floor asked what qualified a dramaturg or LM to wield life

and death power over scripts that came their way, and most of the subsequent discussion revolved around this issue. Ben replied that in practice decisions rarely rest in one person's hands, since the readers and the Artistic Director are also involved in the evaluation of scripts. Jack Bradley explained how the National Theatre tried to ensure that its readers do more than simply provide a subjective reaction: they are selected with the help of sample reports, and as much importance is given to the establishment knowing the readers as vice versa, in order that their reports might be read in context. Steve added that a big, powerful name would not be an appropriate figure to have as a dramaturg because, as had emerged in the preceding discussion, more often than not what was sought was someone to confide in - more like a shrink than a final yes/no authority who would inspire more fear than trust.

In considering the role of a LM it was noted that when sending in a script, a writer may have one of two things in mind: they may be seeking constructive criticism of their work, or they may be looking to develop a longer-term relationship with a particular theatre. Ben estimated that he spent 60% of his time reading and dealing with new, unsolicited work, and the remainder on commissioned pieces in close conjunction with the Artistic Director. It was also pointed out that it is in the theatres' own interests to develop new writing and new audiences. In spite of the pressures (which fall more heavily on theatres than on writers) to produce commercially viable work, theatres must make themselves available to new writing in order to survive. All scripts submitted are read. Providing critical comments is time-consuming and expensive for individual theatres (hence the importance of the New Playwrights' Trust script reading service), but in so far as this is done the advice offered is designed to be constructive. Moreover theatres are well placed to disseminate information and scripts between agents, other venues etc.

### ***How to engage with work which came from a different cultural perspective***

With reference to the earlier observation that the ideal of a dramaturg's job is to bring together as much as possible the play and the writer's idea of it, or in Lucinda's phrase to 'make the play more like itself', one Black questioner wondered how a white dramaturg would approach a Black script. The initial response from the panel divided the room and informed the rest of the debate: was it the case that a good script would stand out as being of worth regardless of any cultural gap between reader and writer, or did a reader need personal experience of the particular cultural viewpoint that a play might be written from? Should you place yourself in the picture presented by the play, or expect that picture to speak to you?

Joanne pointed out that the readers at the Bush do represent a diversity of backgrounds. But even given a fair cultural cross-section, there is the problem, experienced by one Black female participant, of one reader then being considered the only authority on all Black scripts, and looked to constantly for "the Black perspective". There was consensus that it is important to avoid the labelling of work as being from a particular stable. Some contributors to the debate went on to argue that a play which fails to transcend its immediate concerns is not worth doing. Dramatic writing could be said to be all about the meeting of different sets of experiences, they went on, and even a White reader considering a White script is, more often than not, reading outside their own experience. There was nevertheless considerable concern that good non-White writing was being overlooked because white LMs were not in a position to appreciate its merits. A reader is only a transitional phase in the full life of a play, and therefore not the final word on its value, since any dramatic work must rely principally on its relationship with, and effect on, an audience, not a reader. Our attention was drawn

to the current range of writing in performance throughout London: Stratford East was the only venue where Black writing was currently in production.

No representatives from other cultural groups were present to give their point of view, and the vigorous debate reached no decisive conclusions. There was, too, a sense that even some individuals had been unable to make up their minds as to the merits of the two sides of the argument. The impression was that an important and complex area had been touched upon.

## **Myra Brenner**

### **A dramaturgical session with writer David Zaman**

"the dramaturg is a midwife who performs with minimal surgical intervention."  
Myra Brenner

**Myra Brenner** has many years experience working in the US and UK. As a dramaturg she has worked on projects for Talawa and the New Playwrights Trust. She has been Senior Script Associate at Theatre Royal Stratford East for the past six years.

**David Zaman** graduated from the MA in Playwriting Studies at Birmingham University in 1993. He has written six original plays and a stage adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*. He is currently under commission by Theatre Royal Stratford East.

Myra Brenner and David Zaman had met for several sessions prior to this demonstration. This session takes a script in progress as a platform to reveal more general issues and considerations surrounding one to one dramaturgy.

Zaman's play *Steal a Kiss* had been conceived some years ago as an exercise by the writer in creating 'the well made play'. Zaman's dramatic form is distinguished primarily by the episodic structure and the exploration of contemporary worlds, narratives and characters. *Steal a Kiss* embodies the unities of time, action and place in realist form. The setting is "an opulent hotel in New York in 1922". The piece was originally conceived as a prequel to *The Great Gatsby*. The play now functions independently of the novel.

Zaman had been initially concerned with the clarity of the narrative line, that this was something which he found difficult to come to terms with when considering his indicative writing style. Brenner's initial strategy was to divert the writer away from such global concerns, yet with the realisation there that major re-works would be necessary. Zaman was therefore immediately drawn to particular aspects of plot and character which, once solved, would be a means of addressing these more global concerns. Zaman found such a strategy useful, it initiated the process of "cleansing the writing pallet" which meant he was more able to engage with the challenge he had set himself.

Brenner was concerned that at these early sessions the writer should be drawn away from a cold empiricism. "Don't think - feel", became a necessary and recurring instruction. Zaman also found "tinkering" and "unravelling" a useful antidote to what can be a primary concern with "affect". He had coined the term "subversive chic" as a means of describing the tone of the piece, but realised that this could be only be engendered once more specific problems had been addressed.

Brenner made the interesting point that the "dramaturg is the one who does the

research", emphasising the important support required here from the pure perspective of information, that a dramaturg's knowledge of the whole world of the play is central to the job.

A particular problem Zaman found was what he described as the "enacting of action, plot and narrative" as a means of forging ahead. He was concerned also with "fixing characters dramatically", being clear about who they were, which the dramaturgical sessions particularly helped to clarify.

On a more general note, there was the "status of the piece" to take into consideration, and the problem of writing the play the director wants. Brenner asked the important question, "Is the writer the person to ask what his or her play is about?". Brenner also placed a great deal of emphasis in dramaturgy sessions in establishing the relationship between the play and the audience in the first moments. This, she felt, was important when you know your audience embodies a particular cultural and/or ethnic constituency - something which she had to constantly address at Stratford East. There are always certain "rules to the game".

Brenner's aphorism that "the dramaturg is the midwife who performs with minimal surgical intervention" is something she takes one step further. Dramaturgy is "not about what the writer is going to do", but "how the writer is going to do it". She insists the "power of responsibility" has to be taken into account, that "you have to establish a relationship with a writer you might disappoint".

### Discussion/Outcomes

Much of the discussion concentrated on defining the dramaturg's role. It was noted how, in the USA, there are what are called "floor dramaturgs" and "desk dramaturgs" performing somewhat different functions, yet usually existing in a supporting and enabling role to the writer. This was a particular problem in British theatre where the director also often performed the function of dramaturg (a conflict of interest?), particularly where there was no resident literary manager. The position of 'training' was also raised. How can dramaturgs be trained and developed in the current climate of cutbacks. And how precisely defined does their role need to be? German theatre particularly has a long tradition of dramaturg activity - they are always the first port of call for a new play. What can we learn from this? The final consensus was that dramaturgs might be regarded as a luxury, but they are a necessary luxury for the proper development of performance writing.

# Vicky Ireland

## Polka Theatre

Type of session - master class

### Introduction

Polka Theatre is exclusively for children. Open 11 months a year. New writing is ongoing - 3 commissions fill 5 slots annually. The company draws on cultures around the world for its material. It caters for specific age ranges under 5, 5-8,8-13. Polka are not in a financial position to try 'new writers'; there is no fringe for work for children - so the craft is not learnt. Because Polka have to follow through on their commissions, there is no room for failure.....Vicky script edits, dramaturgs and runs workshops around rehearsal.

### Working method

The work is made collaboratively - Vicky has refined the contract to ensure that writers know that they are working as part of a team. The work needs to encompass body language, rhythm, colour - appealing cogently to all the senses.

Polka is aiming towards work that is lucid, buoyant, alive, vibrant and accessible. Many people still have an image of children's theatre as being predominantly about puppets: toys; dolls; teddies - something not quite human. Children's plays educate, entertain and enthrall. Many unsolicited scripts feature Kings, Queens, Clowns, Fairies and Animals. This reveals a misconception of where theatre for children now is - tackling big issues and emotions. Vicky encourages writers to talk to children. She finds that often writers are scared of children - because they don't understand them.

### Workshop

Vicky runs workshops, because with a 3 week rehearsal process, this is the best way to support that - less rehearsal time is spent restructuring plays, if workshops are used as part of the drafting process. Scheduling is very important. Because schools have set times, so there has to be a set pattern to the programming of work. A workshop prior to rehearsal brings in designers and composers to exchange ideas and facilitates an understanding of where to allocate anticipated costs.

Vicky's workshop ingredients include: a warm room, a well organised lunch, a collection of instruments; a basket of silk pieces, rostra and furniture, a tape deck for atmosphere, paper and pen for brainstorming, books for research and a leader who also delegates; trust, good humour, generosity and caring. She uses actors who might be right for the show or actors who enjoy working in a particular way to develop writing.

Vicky uses workshops prior to first draft and after the first draft.

**The first workshop** begins with a brainstorm, sharing ideas on, for example, what makes good theatre. One example is a piece made for the Japan Festival, with the writer Lynn Reid-Banks. Vicky held a 3 day workshop to kick it off. Vicky placed three

stories on the table that were to do with Japanese culture. They began to examine elements of Japanese culture, for example aikido, origami, kabuki, a haiku, a kimono. They emerged with a female protagonist, a Buddhist monk who speaks in haikus, a journey, a tengu (a flying crow) which will be a flying puppet, plague, a faceless warrior who can hear but not see, and a god who takes the form of a badger in a tea-kettle. They focused on the essence of the moment, excising everything which is extraneous; rigour and discipline; and on kabuki and the process of showing what you are doing. All these elements informed the production.

**The second workshop** is undertaken after the first draft. One example is *Sleeping Beauty*, in a version by Charles Way. The play drew on the writer's Welsh background and in particular on the *Mabinogian*, a collection of Welsh stories. For example the piece featured a half man-half dragon as an invisible friend voicing inner thoughts. But certain changes became necessary. Children can get embarrassed by love stories, so the piece had to grow towards romance, with the kiss coming at the end. There were elements of pantomime, with humour which went against the tone of the piece; this was transformed into riddles which tested the audience. Another example is *Down Among the Mini-beasts* by Bryony Lavery, who was asked, after the first draft, to give 5 facts about insects which Vicky wouldn't know. This allowed the discovery of the tracking of the story and facilitated the second draft.

Another piece was an adaptation in which Vicky took a number of Allan Ahlberg poems as the starting point. Vicky got a notional running order, discovered a running character and assembled a team comprising 5 adult actors, a thirteen year old actress and an eight year old actress. Through improvisation they emerged with a set of characters - a bad boy, a know-it-all, a wimp, a horror-girl, an in-your-face girl, a teacher's pet, a head teacher and a form teacher. Improvisation moved towards making a coherent whole, developing these characters so their voices would emerge. Vicky then went away and provided linking material; discovered a structure bookended by the first day of school and the last day of the summer term - school life governed by time. (For this show she got Flik Flak watches to sponsor First Timers, a scheme to invite 20 schools who couldn't otherwise afford to come and a free watch for each child.)

## Discussion

Response to the session included discussion on ownership. What happens if you commission a play about x and you get a play about y? Jeremy Raison felt it was his job as director to know what his audiences were like and so if a piece of work does not look like it will go down, having departed from the idea of x, he will pull it.

The RNT BT connections programme was cited as a model which allowed for a variety of outcomes, although this programme was also noted for the fact that the 'senior' writers who had been approached to write had all declined. Raising the status of the work by getting senior writers to write for young people was believed very important. Vicky advocated a workshop session with senior playwrights to break down barriers.....

# Womens Theatre Workshop:

Dramaturgy: Cheryl Robson

Type of Session: Master class

Level: Predominantly for new writers, based on a one to one approach between writer and dramaturg.

## Introduction

Cheryl Robson, directors **Jacqui Somerville** and **Janet Gordon** work with writers **Lisa Perrotti** and **Barbara Hartridge** on their scripts *Tucson* and *Like a Dancer*. The following outlines the structure of the workshop which explores the work of the dramaturg.

## Workshop Schedule

**1. Introductions. Discussion to open What is dramaturgy?** e.g. The process by which a writer is enabled to realise his/her intentions in a script?

Going on a journey without a map with a person who is trying to make one?

**2. How do we do it?** Feedback from the writers and directors about their own experiences. Cheryl Robson outlines her own preferred way of working i.e. one-to-one, in a private space with a set time and setting clear and realisable objectives for the next session. Offering empathy, positive attention and a non-judgemental attitude to the writer and his/her work.

**3. Discussion of the genesis of Tucson.** How the play grew through 3 drafts, what was the input? The effect of the public readings and feedback. The buddy scheme. How can the play be further developed? Looking at dynamics and ways of making the characters' inner and outer worlds unfold within scenes. The play's metaphor.

**4. Discussion of the genesis of Like a Dancer.** How the play has grown through 2 drafts. What was the input? The effect of the public readings and feedback. The Writers' group Barbara attends. How can the play be further developed? Looking at focusing on key events to achieve more emotional depth and empathy earlier on. The dynamics of relationships involving domestic violence. The dance motif.

**5. Summary. What should we offer as dramaturgs? What do writers want? The role of the Director in development.** Discussion and feedback.

**6. Outline of a possible method.**

*6.1 Support and encouragement at the initial concept stage - the play the writer thinks s/he wants to write may turn out to be a very different creature to the one s/he actually writes.*

*6.2 By feeling our way into the script from the writer's perspective, we can suggest*

*possibilities, encourage new ideas and offer positive attention, valuing the writer's work at first draft stage. (Without this it's hard for the writer to go on to Draft 2) Scene by scene analysis. What is the function of the scene in terms of character/plot/metaphor?*

*6.3 By Draft 2 you have some understanding of what the writer is trying to achieve. Dynamics of the relationships should become clear. Look for the gaps - where s/he avoids giving you the painful emotional responses and cuts out of a scene early or uses an interruption device. Balance of inner and outer worlds. Look for deep character moments - if there aren't any, find places where these might occur and discuss with the writer why s/he might be copping out. Metaphor/Form. Look at the structure - is it working to the advantage of the script as a whole? Is the use of music/design/lighting appropriate? What plot devices are used? Do they work?*

*6.4 Draft 3. Overwritten scripts: Editing by the writer or jointly is best. Offer to edit the script for the writer but only on the understanding that the writer takes responsibility for deciding if these cuts are valid and keeps faith with his/her original intentions. Underwritten scripts: Gentle discussion of what might be missing, why it's difficult to get to this moment/event/action. Is it a question of sign posting to the audience what is happening? If the writer believes the problem can be resolved by 'physical theatre' set up a workshop and get the actors to ask questions to draw out the information or improvise/hot seat around the scene. More often a script is a combination of the above - some scenes underwritten and others overwritten. A dramaturg can help a writer to see what's necessary and focus the script.*

*6.5 A good enough script. Promote the work of the writer to others/invite directors on board and collaborate with writer and director so that the writer's intentions are understood and further developed with actors.*

*6.6 Set up a reading and test the script before an audience. Invite feedback.*

*6.7 Drafts 4-6 - is the script ready for a production? Who might enjoy working on it? Put people in touch with each other. After a year's work on a script, don't let it sit in a drawer because your artistic director is adapting a classic or prefers something else. After all, with new collaborators your writer might get even better input and the script might grow legs and run.*

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**Cheryl Robson** started with a brain storming session. The group discussed 'What is dramaturgy?' Firstly the difference between the European interpretation and the British usage was raised. In European theatre the dramaturg has research and documentation capacities which extend to the practicalities of production. In British tradition the work seems to be predominately script oriented. It was suggested that the dramaturg is rather like a doctor, providing surgery on the play. They are someone with a developed knowledge of play craft who can help the writer see the wood from the trees and focus the work, often acting as a sounding board, at other times perhaps arbitrator between the theatre, writer and director.

The group was provided with handouts that outlined the plot and characters of **Lisa Perrotti's** play 'Tucson'. This piece had been developed through three drafts and changed quite radically with the help of Cheryl's dramaturgical work. Lisa was a young writer who felt she had greatly benefited from the process of working with a dra-

maturg. Cheryl had been like a second pair of eyes, pointing out areas that were unfocused or undeveloped. Characters that began as plot devices were fleshed out, as draft to draft the play gained layers of meaning without becoming woolly and confused. Cheryl illustrated the way in which she can make the writer more conscious of the dynamics that are going on in their work. In Lisa's play she perceived a triangular shape of persecution and victimisation in which the characters were enmeshed. Once she had identified this Lisa was able to make more conscious use of the patterns that were taking place.

Janet was brought in to direct a reading of *Tucson* and the actors and an invited audience contributed to the dramaturgical process by providing their own source of input; which characters felt slightly underwritten, which areas grabbed the attention, which areas seemed to lag etc.

*Like a Dancer* was a first play for **Barbara Hartridge** and was inspired by her attendance at a writers group. She hit upon one of the most valuable assets of dramaturgy when explaining how difficult it was for her to digest group feedback. Not only was this her first play and as a result she'd wanted to put everything in it, but she'd tried to account for everyone in the group's criticisms as well. It's very important that new writers discover their own voice, not an amalgam of that and the input of fifty other people. Once experienced, a writer learns how to listen to some things and not listen to others in order to achieve their desired end result. One to one dramaturgy allows a new writer to focus on problem area - without becoming flustered and confused. Cheryl was able to help Barbara realise more fully the dance motif at work within the play. She could also point out to her the cyclical dynamic of domestic violence and suggest ways in which this could be used more effectively.

Through both these examples it would seem that the dramaturg is principally concerned with shaping form rather than content and questions such as dialogue and characterisation are far less heavily stressed.

What does a writer really want from a dramaturg? The group concluded that most importantly they needed a one to one focus on the creative process in order to curb isolation and stimulate new directions or ideas. Timely intervention and an ability to help unstick problems were also deemed crucial. Manipulation and the imposition of an agenda were identified as unacceptable traits, as was any danger of quashing the writer's unconscious creativity.

## Conclusion

Both of these writers seemed to benefit enormously from the process. They felt that their plays had improved dramatically and that they had flourished with the confidence that working with a dramaturg had provided. But a number of interesting questions were raised and left hanging in the air at the end of this session. They need to be dealt with in order to fully realise the position of the dramaturg:

Who is the dramaturg responsible to? Is it the theatre, the writer or the director?

Can they really develop a play's true potential if they are working within the financial restrictions of the theatre ie only four- actors allocated to the project?

What happens when the writer becomes more experienced and confident in their own voice and dramatic ability? How does the relationship between them and the dramaturg then change and develop?

How do directors, dramaturgs and writers work together? Cheryl advocated that both should be working in tandem with the writer from the beginning of the process, but, if so, who has ultimate dramatic responsibility?

Are there negatives if the director isn't closely involved in the drafting process or if the dramaturg still has considerable input into the script during the rehearsal process?

Both plays are now awaiting full production and only then will some of these questions come to the fore. Most importantly the two writers, directors and dramaturg are happy that the plays are in considerably better shape than two drafts ago and are hoping to see the investment in them finally fully realised in front of an audience.

## **The Sphinx**

### **Some Provocations**

Type of session - master class / panel discussion

### **Sue Parrish**

Sue Parrish set the context and recapped on the work of the company, before handing over to current colleagues. She is interested in working with a range of artists. Women's Theatre Group was founded in 1973 to create theatre by, about and for women. Feminism and women's theatre has since changed. Sue came 6 years ago and found the notion of a separatist operation strange - "it has become clear that we don't feel that the company is now for a women only audience,

The company originated with a group of actresses devising and then commissioning work. Sue is interested in women writers. Women have less of a visible history of being artists and never had the same freedoms. In the last 25 years the company has served actresses or ideas. Sue wanted to create a space and company for writers to be entirely free of ideological constraints. As the company only puts on 2 shows a year, it cannot liberally bestow commissions; so it admits to looking for work with a feminist awareness / perspective. Sue is concerned with issues of visibility creating representations of women which counter the fetishisation of women by male writers - she also wants to challenge audiences: so she is not interested in naturalism / realism as women can be represented in stereotypical ways.

### **Bryony Lavery**

Currently working on the text 'Goliath' - a one-woman show based on the book, Bryony did not want to speak about that as "there are certain times when it is good to talk about work in progress and times when it is not".

As a substitute she presented an adaptation of a book : 'The Writers' Journey', by Christopher Vogler which sets out for writers how to structure their work. Bryony made

an arbitrary decision as to how to adapt the book - in the form of a quiz. She prefaced the retelling by posing a question of the session: "- does what follows give an idea of the book - or is there too much of the writer?" She continued : "The book's premise is that there is a certain way of telling all stories. The author begins by telling the reader what he is going to do - mythic structure for storytellers and screenwriters: 'the hero's journey'"

Bryony quoted '3 pieces of sound advice before we start':

"This is the tale I pray the divine muse to unfold to us. Begin it, goddess, at whatever point you will. / There are only 2 or 3 human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before. / Summoned or not the god will come."

The step by step breakdown was accompanied by a quotation from a play or screenplay which the session were invited to guess from the initials of the author . In summary these steps are:

- The hero who is brave, but human for us....
- The mentor who helps our hero
- The threshold guardian who warns our hero off
- The herald who issues the challenge of our story
- The shapeshifter...someone to constantly change our hero's perspective
- The shadow...energy of the dark side
- The trickster...brings mischief and the desire for change
- We start the journey in the ordinary world
- We are called to adventure
- We are reluctant to go, we refuse the call to adventure
- We meet a friend ...the mentor
- We cross the threshold into a strange world
- We meets, tests, allies, enemies
- We get scared as things get worse
- It gets worse
- We get rewarded for bravery
- We try to return to our old world
- Our hero dies a spiritual death and is reborn
- We return with the elixir...something with the power to heal a wounded land..
- We look back on the journey

Bryony left the session to make its own conclusions and answer silently the question she had posed at the start of her section....

## **Annie Castledine**

Mindful of the context of the 4 days, Annie wanted to be personal, She brought with her an M&S bag which would contain elements of a sort of stream of consciousness - out of which would perhaps emerge a narrative.

First item was a CV - not an act of hubris. Annie started making theatre outside the professional theatre world. She always thought that if you were good enough, that would be sufficient - if women writers were good enough, and shown to be good

enough that too would be sufficient. For a large part of her working life, she had worked with women writers, yet still finds that women are not at the summit -" a tangible force of women writers whose perceptions make such a contribution to our lives that it cannot be escaped. Though it seems as though we are getting there, a huge push is still required."

Annie would like to see laboratories all over the country developing work - privately, away from immediate production. "Experimenting with form, not content. The 'vase' that contains the content. Enabling a practical understanding of the importance of structure. Women artists need help, work, experience and encouragement. This needs to be the mission of practitioners".

"In Ibsen's *A Dolls House* (also in the bag), a woman is centre stage who finds a voice and a man is left centre stage to realise the importance of that voice. If you look at the position of women you'll get to the hub of how a society is evolving and coping. Brecht in *Fear & Miseries of the Third Reich* (also in the bag) understood that only by depicting women could he get to the core of society."

Bea Campbell's *Goliath* is essentially a piece of journalism. Annie wanted to explore the form of the one-person show. But Annie sees no separation between pieces of work. her work is ongoing - pushing forward the physical and verbal text; language and body in space; performer/audience communication. She was also inspired by Anne de Vere Smith's show at the Royal Court as a way of reporting a contemporary crisis with its skill in representing different points of view and an audience's response to a single moment. "*Goliath* is a text to take us into the next millennium - about inner city deprivation, people who had taken part in riots, also about mothers and sons-complex relationships."

There always has to be an enabler for any project - Sue Parrish said to her - "what would you like to do?" Pieces of work that were not finished, wheels....Annie had worked with Bryony many years previously and wanted to renew the partnership. Bea Campbell agreed to the project and she and Bryony began by talking about it; then Bryony produced an initial response." A consummate first draft was initially beguiling-but on closer inspection structurally nowhere; the writing was experienced, so deceiving - actually a series of characters all telling their stories about a specific event; but the event didn't come for a long time." The first meeting between Annie & Bryony signalled this issue; the second articulated it more strongly. Asking the basic question: why is this performer on stage? - because it is a one-person show - Who is she? - a performer expressing the point of view of a moment.

The designer and a live musician were already on board and the piece was semi-cast. With the second meeting - rather than the examination of how to start and why the performer would want to be there, what the dialogue began to do was unfold a structure: There was a happening - out of that the performer emerged.

Next will be a fortnight's workshop with Bryony, the performer, a script and the designer. This will be a private space to work on the second draft that Bryony has prepared (July/August). This will be worked hugely. After those 2 weeks, Bryony will create a rehearsal text by January. Time for a consummate script to emerge; time to mine; to perform.

"There is a pool of very capable women writers that need championing. **Goliath** will have had a 2 year gestation period." Rather than not do a new piece, Annie used to enter into 3 week rehearsal periods. This can be exhilarating if it works, but she no longer subscribes to the 'we will make it work' school.

## Discussion

Jacqui Somerville (Women's Theatre Workshop) said that how major themes are expressed is the business of theatre makers; there is no need to stay wedded to structure. Bryony replied that being unhelpfully faithful was certainly not the answer, one has to learn to respect and to reinterpret. " a book about form should be regarded as a tool kit".

Annie replied that the selection of what happens, where and when makes up meaning - that structure should be intentional - a conscious action containing the meaning. She cited the example of Marguerite Duras' **India Song** - the only live sounds in the piece are the sobs of the Vice Consul of Lahore - the space in front of the audience is an echo chamber. Eavesdroppers comment on what's happening and what's happened (disembodied voices); physical, visual and oral texts do not necessarily coincide - yet this is a classic text by a woman. Commissioned 20 years earlier by Peter Hall for the RNT it had lain unperformed. If Annie had not been curious, If Helena Kaut-Howsen, Artistic Director of Theatr Clwyd had not said "what do you want to do?" ..

Bernadette O'Brien (Theatre Centre) asked: The history of women's theatre is located at the stage in the mythic journey of the (s)hero when they can be talked out of it. As women theatre makers, how do we structure our process (Theatre Centre uses scenarios and development weeks) - is this luxury or the stuff which underpins the journey to the summit? The response was "Find the stern, kind, able, loving person...."

Annie's final questions to the session were - What do you need to develop theatre writing? What are the conditions? What might be the manifesto? The response included: *Space to do our work. More trained dramaturgs. Being allowed to fail. Finding new ways to tell stories. Better communication between practitioners*

Bryony concluded that it is not a competition between men and women instinct has to be trusted, as do doubts....

### **3. Different Approaches**

**Phelim McDermott.**

#### **Devising**

Type of session - workshop

#### **Introduction**

Phelim began by explaining not only that improvisation has informed all of his performing and directing work of the last few years, but also that there is one improvisation exercise that seems to cover everything.

#### **Exercise**

The group split up into pairs. Everyone held on to their partner so that they faced the same direction, and then began to tell a story, each person supplying one word at a time, so that there were about a dozen two-person story-telling units moving around the room. After an initial trial period we were asked to bear two things in mind: each couple was to use the present tense, and to speak and behave as one person. Most of the session was taken up with exploring this exercise and improving our skill at it. Initially everyone worked at once, but later on we watched couples working on their own, and developed our understanding of the principles involved that way. From very early on the idea of an audience was introduced, and with Phelim's help we began to explore some of the basic elements of the story-teller's art.

#### **The Results**

##### ***The teller***

The stories that came out were fantastic and exotic, almost always fairy-tale in character. We discussed the issue of censoring ideas, which manifested itself as having a word on the tip of your tongue but not saying it, and instead hesitating before choosing another. We decided the reason for this common phenomenon was often the sense of responsibility one felt as a co-teller of the story, which made people look a long way ahead to where the tale might be taking them. The stories that worked best had lots of rapid, short-term changes of leader, with each teller taking charge completely on their word, and then ceding responsibility completely to their partner on the next word. Nevertheless, there were moments when it was right to take control more firmly, to clarify a situation, or to push definitively towards a crisis point in the story when there was hesitation.

##### ***The world of the story***

One of the first conclusions to emerge was that it was very obvious to a spectator when the story was properly inside two performers, and truly happening to them in the present. The prerequisite for this essential involvement in whatever fantasy world the words conjured up, seemed to be a complete commitment to that universe. In this way the world created began to act on its creators, much like happens in a dream, and

became entirely absorbing for an audience. In simple terms, "do what you are doing" was a vital principle. As the couples took this on board, they became more animated in their peripatetic narratives.

The natural extension of this rule of commitment means that brave choices had to be taken. If confronted with a gunman, shoot or negotiate, but don't just move away. If the words suddenly create a bear, it is not a satisfactory development in the story from the audience's point of view for the tellers then to move away from it. We, as viewers, want to see our heroes move towards danger, get into trouble. The way to get into trouble is to be positive. Getting into trouble is not, however, to be confused with being troubled. Very often a look of anxiety crept on to a performer's face. An audience is looking for heroes whom they can think are fantastic, who do things differently. Simply getting worried is too close to the audience's own experience to make satisfying viewing.

### ***Always be in trouble***

When we started to watch individual couples working / playing, we observed many refinements to these basics. The first few seconds of a story proved to be crucial. Where the eyes were looking was an important factor (looking outwards to the world about to be created, or more blank and inwards?), and whether the two tellers were looking in the same direction. The best stories (and it was always surprisingly easy to agree on which stories we liked) then began with an initial period of calm. The tales which kicked off immediately with a glut of trouble and danger seemed to have missed out on two things: first, the creation of a world for the story, an atmosphere or environment which embraced performers and audience, placing them in the same space, and helping to generate a uniformity of tone. Sudden changes of place and atmosphere proved bewildering and alienating for the audience. And secondly it seemed to be vital that the audience had a chance to get to know the heroes, for the simple reason that we then care about them when the first danger comes along. This initial period of being with an audience and meeting them proved daunting, and induced some couples to turn away from the front, or collapse slowly into the floor, apparently becoming smaller and smaller. A solution is giving the audience what it wants in terms of bold decisions and the realisation that trouble is rewarded with a kind of energy that pushes the story forwards.

### ***Reincorporation***

Another lesson had to do with the question of re-incorporation. Because the great challenge of staying firmly in the present tense was not always met, couples of tellers often made promises to their audiences of things they were about to do. One pair told us "I will win an Olympic medal", but then their story wandered elsewhere, and they failed to do what they had said they would. The audience agreed on how satisfying it would have been to see this promise fulfilled, especially if it came after an interval when we had feared it would not return, or forgotten all about it ourselves. The important element here is one of surprise. If re-incorporation of a feature in the story is too conscious or forced, then the surprise is diminished, and so is the audience's pleasure.

### ***Let the story tell itself***

Towards the end of the session Phelim introduced a development of this exercise: this

time there were to be three story-tellers, facing away from us, and one performer, facing us, whose duty it was to act out the instructions he or she elicited from the tellers by asking at every turn, "what happens next?" The tellers took turns in providing the next instruction.

O  
performer

O    O    O  
story-tellers

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audience

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The first sentence of the first story was "you are walking on ice". This proved to be not a good start. We decided that this was because it imposed trouble too early, when we had not yet had a chance to get to know our hero. Tellers should resist the temptation to make trouble happen, but instead trust that it will arrive. In a later story, for example, a mirror in to which our hero was looking suddenly cracked, which was experienced as a brutal and unwelcome shock by both performer and audience alike. That is the most likely result when trouble is forced. Phelim pointed out an intriguing paradox: from the point of view of the audience, where none of the pressure of producing a good story is felt, but all of the desire for one, it always seems clear exactly what we want to happen next. For the tellers, however, who have shouldered the burden of the narrative, there is more doubt about what the right development in the story is.

### *The significance of detail*

It also became very clear this time that the tellers have to be completely aware of what they have created. In one story, the performer was told that she was walking along a road, and that it was sunny. Various other things then happened, but none of them seemed satisfying. The sunniness had become an important element in the story for us, particularly because the detail had been mentioned so early on. For the audience it was significantly sunny, and we wanted to see the sunniness used or re-incorporated in some way. The eagerness of an audience to read significance into events acted out by the performer was also illustrated when Phelim solved the apparent stagnation of that sunny road story simply by telling the performer to stop walking. That action alone constituted an event, and clearly opened the way to further developments. This underlined the point that the tellers do not need to have thought of a story in order to tell one: the addition of one small detail can lead to all kinds of unforeseen possibilities.

The next story provided an example of just this phenomenon: a man has a lump on his arm which he examines. He then picks up a briefcase, and looks at his watch. That last action was experienced by all the audience as particularly significant. It seemed to open up a specific world beyond the room where we and the man were. It suggested different things to different people (though everyone seemed to have imagined one of only two or three possibilities), but for everyone that simple gesture suggested a range of enticing potential directions, which absorbed us completely.

## Conclusion

Phelim's closing thought seemed a very fair summary of what we had done and witnessed. He said that since stories are already there, telling them is more a question of allowing them to happen than anything else. We have an intuitive knowledge of story-telling, and so structures are best left to invent themselves. Even though we had spent two hours on just two exercises, they were by no means exhausted. There seemed to be plenty more to learn, both in terms of refining the exercises for their own sake, and also as devices for learning about story-telling in general, from a performer's or a writer's point of view.

## **Ruth Ben Tovim, Louder Than Words**

### **Writing the Visual**

Type of Session: Workshop

### Introduction

Ruth Ben Tovim is the Artistic Director of Louder Than Words, a company which has been in operation for a couple of years, and concerned with the relationship between 'the visual' and 'the text' in live art based practice. As a freelancer Ben Tovim had been involved with laboratory work exploring the bridge between 'the devised' and 'the written', carried through to her work with Louder Than Words exploring the relationship between set text and structured improvised text; the relationship between the rehearsal and the pre-rehearsal process; moving towards a notion of a 'score' involving a whole group of primary creators.

Ben Tovim's practice is indicative of a growing movement challenging and complementing what she describes as "garret writing". It raises some fundamental questions. What is a writer? What is a text? Ben Tovim stated that she "wanted to do more than realise someone else's text"; was interested in "sharing a primary creative role"; and "always worked with someone else - a writer".

*Dreamtime*, produced by Louder Than Words at the Young Vic in summer 1996, developed from an original idea by Ben Tovim, text by three writers and was 'created' by the company. Ben Tovim emphasises the collaborative nature of the work, and includes within that the 'structuring' of the piece - conventionally residing within the domain of the writer in text-based practice. Ben Tovim has also been increasingly interested in the concepts of 'inundation' and 'multi-layering', and the operation of elements on a subliminal level. *Dreamtime* might have typically been described as a promenade production, but it was the audience themselves who had to 'navigate' their way through the piece, constituting an "exploration through form", characterised by different texts and physical actions operating simultaneously with the effect of direct and/or subliminal reception.

### **The Workshop**

This would explore a theme/idea with a multi-layered approach.

### Exercise 1- working in pairs

What can writers offer, other than a stage direction, which acts as something integral to the way a piece is visually received? This exercise explored the possibility of how an 'instruction' can create an idea or an image. Ben Tovim's directives were that the instructions must not carry motivation, reason or psychological coherence, and also not encourage a crude form of mime. There must also be no sound. Instructions must be "real to what the space is". Emphasis was therefore placed on the 'person in space' through physical action, by way of an instruction such as:

"Walk to the end of the room.

"Close Eyes.

"Walk Back."

The exercise revealed the possibility of 'balance' between the personal approach to a physical action and the instruction given to carry that action out. "What interests the instructor about this particular body in space?" Comment was made of the intimate and expansive use of space, with an ever-increasing dynamic use of space. Ben Tovim also noted that "a minimal thing can be loaded".

Each pair in the group alternated as instructor and body in space.

### Exercise 2 - working in new pairs

Exercise 1 was repeated adding in an "as if" to the instruction. For example:

"Someone is chasing you as if the floor is burning."

"You have a deadline to meet as if with a sharp pain in the intestine."

This exercise was again undertaken without sound, with the result this time of a greater balance between the psychological and the physical, continuing to resist a motivational complex allowing concentration on physical detail.

Each pair alternated as instructor and body in space.

### Exercise 3 - the group divided into two, working in new pairs

The integration of exercises 1 and 2. A third element was now added which would involve people in the designated group. For example:]

"(instruction)...and you want to dance with people passionately." "(instruction)...and you want to take every-one's pulse."

This exercise created a simultaneous series of actions within each group, with a balance required between "doing to other people the instructed action" and "doing your own instructed action". The forms of interaction often required and resulted in changes in dynamic, rhythm and detail.

Ben Tovim then passed a word noun on to the instructor which the instructor had to integrate into the instruction. For example:

"With remorse, someone is chasing you as if the floor is burning and you want to take everyone's pulse."

Each pair alternated as instructor and body in group/space.

#### Exercise 4 - working in new pairs

This exercise introduced text, but again within the governing principle of an 'instruction'. The instructor told their partner to tell a particular/personal story with a 'quirk'. For example:

"speak about a really truthful, painful love affair as though you were a game show host."

Ben Tovim pointed out that this exercise could have amusing results, but that there are other possibilities. This exercise also demonstrates the difference between 'writing' a text and 'instructing' a text and what new possibilities can emerge.

#### Exercise 5 - working in 5 groups of six

This final exercise integrated the previous four. Ben Tovim instructed each group to make a "collage, fabric, pattern" out of one of the following themes to which the five groups were assigned:

1. Collecting the Twentieth Century
2. A Search for Meaning
3. Chaos and Order
4. Little Slivers of Life
5. Time is Relative

Instructions had to be given out before anything approaching 'rehearsal' could begin, and the groups were given time for pooling suggestions. Each group was asked to consider the following:

- employing element of set text
- working in juxtaposition
- an individual speaking a piece of set text
- how chaotic?
- balance between the personal journey and the collected
- the 'macro' and the 'micro'
- clarity of instruction that will trigger off a symbol

#### Conclusion

Each of the five groups presented their pieces. A remarkable level of detail emerged and there was a distinct 'performative' quality to each of the pieces. A question raised was how could the technique/device of 'instruction' impact on the writer's particular working function here - indicative of interdisciplinary practice with its collaborative working contexts? Ben Tovim pointed out that Louder Than Words would use video to record the instructions set in rehearsal which the writer could then later employ.

This workshop presented just one example of the creation and function of text in interdisciplinary/live art practice. Such work raises questions for many, not least over the question of 'authorship' and definition of role. However, the increasing role of text in interdisciplinary work means that it cannot be ignored in any full discussion on contemporary theatre and performance writing.

## **Tim Etchells:**

Type of session - workshop

*Workshop Objective - A practical session exploring strategies for developing, writing and structuring text alongside ideas about performance and theatre space.*

### **Introduction re: working methodology and background information**

Tim is one of the founder members of Forced Entertainment, a Sheffield based company who have been working as an ensemble for 12 years. They began making work for 'Black Box' studio theatre type spaces. The work has always been eclectic having been influenced by music, cinema and literature as well as theatre. In the past few years the company have been making work in different spaces - for example in Manchester Central Library, or a guided bus tour in Sheffield, also installation work with performance elements.

### **Working Process**

Forced Ents started as an ensemble who shared all of the roles in making a performance. Over a number of years the roles solidified and by and large Tim Etchells writes and directs the company's work. He watches long, unstructured improvisation sessions and notes what works/ interests /amuses/ fascinates him. In this process 9/10ths of the work is not used. They also use video in rehearsal as a way of charting ideas in the improvisations. Tim views the video as an efficient note taker. For example, without video, after the improvisation has finished one 'moment' might have stood out as having 'worked' but when re-created feels like a component is missing. The video might clarify that whilst the major components of the moment was happening whether it be a piece of text or a particular physical sequence, in the background another performer was moving or saying a piece of text. And perhaps in that case the juxtaposition between foreground and background is what made the 'moment' work. the video enables the company to register the layering of a moment and the details of each performer's journey.

Within this process Tim is writing text but not the show. The text is part of the improvisation process, another element to be used in rehearsal in the creation of the show.

Tim will use fragments of text which have been found/written/stolen and offer them to the rehearsal process. Often the text is a paragraph long or maybe half a page. When presented Tim has no idea who will be speaking the lines, why they will say them or in what context - they are viewed as a collection of scraps of language.

The company has a general agreement that no-one will come to the rehearsal process with anything too finished - the designer, composer, performers, writer/director.

The starting point for both set and text is often previous shows - with the company in the early stages of rehearsal creating a playground from the past to create something new. Both set and text evolve organically as the rehearsal process progresses. Tim has often found that the most finished ideas that he brings to rehearsal are often the least used and the most unhelpful in the process. The more disorganised, fragmentary and incomplete the initial text is then the more hooks are available for the other co-creators to grab hold of and then enjoy completing.

One structure for textual development by the company (based on *Hidden J*) could be viewed as: 1) Visual suggestion (costume) from Actor. 2) Text written by writer. 3) Actor improvisation with text. 4) Actor and writer/director negotiate and evolve final form and content together

### Introduction to specific work to be undertaken in the workshop.

Tim introduced the idea of thinking about text as a 'quotation' - a second hand object. He views writing, speech and text as something which is always haunted by culture, history, biographies. In effect all writing can be viewed as drawing on other voices. Examples of the idea of speech as quotation: 'To speak for a moment like they do in a film'. 'To speak like one's father', 'To borrow a speech pattern from a friend when they are not there.' Speech as quotation is conscious and strategic as well as unconscious. Forced Ents have often made work using characters who don't own the voices they are speaking in - voices which don't rise from a fully formed 'self' Using the example of a piece called *200% and Bloody Thirsty*, Tim described characters attempting to take on the voices of Angels who were present on video. The characters attempt to try and steal the language of the Angels in order to become as powerful as them. As a writer Tim views one aspect of his role as providing a switching station - creating a channel for lots of voices - he is not interested in the concept of 'finding his own voice' as a writer, or with issues of authenticity.

The idea of a gap between the character and a piece of language which they are attempting to use is a key aspect of Forced Ents work. This distance has led to text being able to be viewed as a physical object with a history and context of its own, separate from the character which uses it.

### Practical Session

#### **Stage One**

The participants of the workshop were split into 2 groups

Group 1 : Instruction - write 50 questions in the form of a questionnaire - You can draw on any kind of questioning eg market research, very personal, trivia, science etc - You can use questions which demand yes and no responses as well as questions which require longer answers.

(The tasks set the two groups were unrelated - in fact the workshop ran out of time and was unable to explore the work which group 2 were set but I list the instructions below for reference)

Group 2 : Instruction - Make 20 statements about an imaginary film. Some descriptions might be more extended than others. Stray as far afield as you want to eg the film climaxed with a big shoot out at the end; the middle of the film is too long.

#### **Stage Two**

Members of group 1 asked members of group 2 the questions which they had written - Both groups were told that group 2 could lie if they wanted to.

Below is a random and eclectic mix of questions and answers that were asked and

given by the 7 groups.

What makes you happy? - the idea of success

Who taught you ballet ?- Margot and Rudolph

How many moons does Jupiter have ? - 3

When was the Berlin wall erected ? - 1961

Are you a home bird or a party animal? increasingly a home bird

Have you been in analysis? - yes

What is your most hated element - fire

### **Stage Three**

Instruction: In groups of 4/5 use the questions again but set it up in the space and think about it in performance terms. Think about the use of space, the number of people answering / questioning and the rhythm of the presentation.

Each of the groups interpreted the brief differently - several groups concentrated on creating a 'fiction' - a psychology/story/characterisation behind the questions and answers - one group focused more on the physicality and status relationships of the questioner / answerer. Each of the groups then 'showed ' their work.

Tim then worked with one of the groups in front of the others - he moved the answerer from sitting to standing looking at the audience while the questioners stayed behind him at the back. Tim observed that none of the groups had placed the questioners to the audience for our inspection instead they had turned them to each other making the audience 3rd party spectators.

### **Discussion**

In the brief discussion that followed many issues were raised and Tim related elements which had in the improvisations, to his own explorations. Points raised included: structural possibilities; the changing status of the performers; insistence and repetition of a specific line providing a frame through which we can look at the rest of the un-repeated material; realness - the power generated when a question hits the here and now; the difference between acting and performing; is it a scene between 2 people or a discussion between 2 people which will be listened to by an audience; and how does this knowledge effect delivery / context / psychology; presence - how direct presence on stage with an audience can bind the text to them and the world.

## **Ian Spink - Second Stride**

Type of session - workshop

### **Introduction**

Ian's background is originally in ballet, then in Contemporary Dance. Born in Australia he came to London in 1977 and has worked with Tim Albery and Anthony MacDonald. He has also worked with Joint Stock and writers such as Caryl Churchill and David Lan. Ian had recently worked on *Badenheim 1939* - adapted from a novel by Aharon Appelfeld in which a group of Austrian Jews on holiday discover they are being sent to Poland. He devises theatre work, has contact with different disciplines, has an irrev-

erence for pure forms and is most interested in the territory between forms.

*Coming from dance to text.*

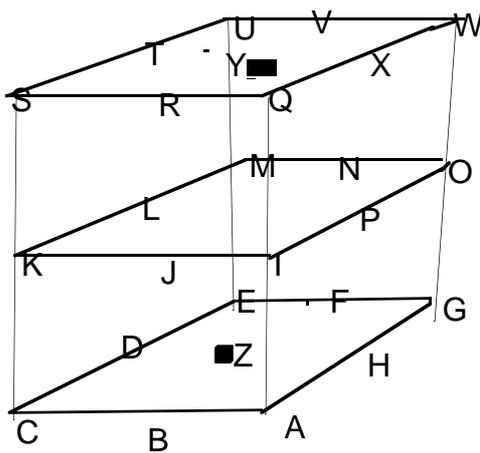
"How can a hidden agenda or a series of processes be communicated? Working from structured improvisations, will an audience know if the journey hasn't been travelled?"

*Leaving gaps for the audience to be aware.*

"Classical ballet has no subtext; the technique of ballet is akin to traditional playwrighting with full stage directions".

**Exercise:** (Adapted from American choreographer Trisha Brown)

- > Imagine that you are in the middle of a crate.
- > Allocate letters to fixed positions of the crate in alphabetical order (see figure)
- > Then using parts of your body, indicate or "spell out" your name.



*your head is at Y and your feet at Z*

- > Begin by just spelling the first three letters of your name
- > Then the full name
- > Then add 2 sounds derived from the name as you are spelling it out

*This is an abstraction, but also self-revealing*

*What you arrive at is a gesture that is highly personalised.*

- > Next write a short postcard, beginning 'Dear Mum' and ending 'Love (your name)'
- > Invent a series of gestures which relate to the words, but which have personal resonance or significance to you - culminating in the spelling out of your own name (letter by letter, as before).

*This is set up to push you against going with a narrative (think of each word as a separate action)*

- > Then juxtapose one person saying their postcard with another gesturing theirs
- > Have the two people not look at each other.

*Different lengths of time are taken*

> Repeat the exercise, but the person saying their postcard repeats the spoken text.  
*Repetition of spoken text or silence while the gestures are completed switches focus*

*As the text is abstracted so conjunctions and prepositions become less important*

*In the search to find 'the right word' there is discontinuity....dancers will tend to make the gestures flow.*

*In rehearsing their postcards some participants found themselves constructing a smoother narrative by amending the gestures of each word to combine more fluidly.*

> Divide into pairs. Using the gestural vocabulary you have now built from your postcard, have one person verbally ask a simple question.

> Have their partner reply using two gestures from their gestural vocabulary.

> Repeat the exercise, but choose which gestures to use before the question is asked.

> Then vocalise your mother's name and your place of birth together with those gestures.

These exercises / improvisations can continue to build and develop as more and different instructions are added

## **Discussion**

There can be strong connections in the arbitrary qualities. Developing a dictionary of gestures allows them to be reassembled in different ways. It is like devising a scale or series of tones. It is like editing a film. A few simple things are being explored and used. Moving from abstractions to deeper emotional memory, improvisation is then used to select the most true and relevant. The audience receives a mood or a sense - beyond narrative. This might allow different understanding about how a person might communicate something.

This questions the impetus towards 'making sense' which pre-empts putting things into structures and frameworks.

Tony Craze observed that this is why Forced Entertainment doesn't want to have its work explained.

The process tentatively demonstrated, is about not deconstructing the mystery, but getting the audience to help create the making of meaning.

If you start to use 'words' in a random way, you set up a conversation where people can only use vocabularies they have built up. One could discover characters or relationships that one could never have otherwise imagined

If an audience watched 25 questions and none made sense they would soon get bored. Therefore there has to be conscious decision-making process to guide the material

Structures can become very complex.

If you go back to the beginning, and select very specific material, which has very personal emotional investment - then you are drawing on personal experience from memory; a rich vein to tap into the experience of performers. There can be a resonance for the work each time it is performed because the process is showing, repeating and living the work.

Words both constrain and liberate. Often when they are wall-to-wall there is no room for imagination. All art is about making the unconscious, conscious.

*Both Spink and the group felt that the exercise could have usefully developed further; that there was perhaps too much explanation of what was happening or why; but also a sense of excitement at the possibilities.*

## **Bonnie Greer**

### **Black Dramaturgy**

Type of session: master class

#### **Introduction**

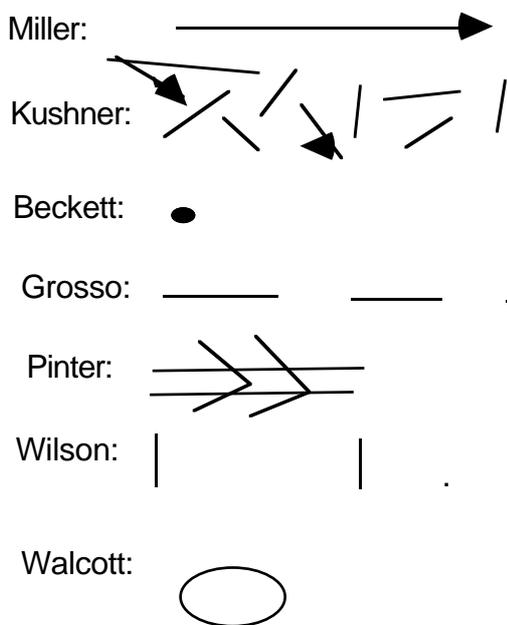
Bonnie Greer has worked in the USA & UK in a wide range of contexts and in particular with Black playwrights, women playwrights and to develop black writing. 3 years ago Bonnie, together with Joan Anne Maynard, wanted to explore the possibilities of a codification of black dramaturgy. With London Arts Board support this became ***Black Voices For the New Millennium***, an exploration of Black dramaturgy trailing 4 writers over an 18 month period - with NPT documenting. A fuller exploration of this area can be found in ***Going Black Under the Skin***, (available from NPT)

Bonnie introduced the session with a supposition:

“Central to the definition of a black dramaturgy is the combination of 4 elements: time, language, space and the relationship between the playwright and their audience. This is not to say that other marginalised sectors do not contain one or more of these elements in their writing, but that in combining the four, writers of the Black Diaspora have produced work which is noble, dynamic, complex and worthy of its own body of care and expertise.”

#### **1. Time**

Bonnie asked the group how they experienced stage time; in particular how they would draw the stage time of a number of playwrights. The group quickly came up with sketches (which are open to question):



Bonnie's assertion was that the shape which most represents Black writing is the circle.

"If you come to a Black text expecting a line, how will you understand the circle? The circle has to do with The African Continuum. It is a circle which contains the living, the dead, and the as yet unborn. Not all black plays work this way, but many black plays are an encounter / discussion with all these elements. The circle stymies critics and dramaturgs alike. The circle is the dynamic which creates Black writing's unique shape."

"To the question sometimes asked of a script, 'Why is this being repeated?', the answer might be that repetition is echoing concerns - part of the African experience. Black writers often work with the unconscious - which is what African culture does. (The Greeks were the pioneers of conscious thought codification). When stuck, it can be because black writers experience the collision between the circle and the straight line; this melange of circle and line, this translating of shape into what is understood as theatre."

"Some writers break through and are effectively working both systems - Derek Walcott, August Wilson - and critics say: "I don't understand it, but I respect it".

"What happened to English playwriting with Shakespeare? It embodied the moment when the question "Who is at the centre of experience. God or man?" was being addressed. This question is almost always of concern to black playwrights."

"In answer to the question : "what makes you write?", some Black writers will respond that they have something to say to the community. There is something incantatory about bringing together the community in a space. Black writers are *not* writing in a postmodern universe, with concerns of: 'no more god, no more community', nor in a Brechtian universe where men and women are essentially alone".

## 2. Words

Bonnie asked the group for their definition of what the function of words might be:

*making sound; conveying feeling; communication / transaction between people; telling stories; revealing feeling; reinforcing action; as tools of the voice; negotiating meaning; defining character -*

Bonnie observed that these all tended towards the primacy of coherent words giving information:

"a common suggestion is "use the words which will move the play along". Black writers use words in an incantatory fashion, to get the audience to another state. So August Wilson might have a 15 minute monologue. In this sense the use of words is more akin to grand opera, where they stop the play and sing the aria. Black writing uses the music.... applauds the voice, the notes. Shakespeare delighted in language, and if Mamet never writes language beyond his character, Ntozake Shange is out there in the stratosphere".

Felix Cross (Artistic Director, Black Theatre Co-op) spoke of his use of music to talk about theatre; he saw himself as an expanded songwriter, with incantations and rhythms - a song that doesn't have a fixed starting point or resolution. He wondered how composing a rhythmic statement on the spot - in a bar - can then be utilised by a writer:

"The formal cultural education process elevates certain art forms over others. A lack of self-confidence is one example of Black writers getting stuck. How do Literary managers look at a song, in its biggest sense? The demarcation between word and music in Black culture is very small. Martin Luther King in full flow is music. There is an appreciation of oratory."

Bonnie continued:

"If you free the music of the voice that could have a huge impact. In answer to the question: "does this carry over when Black writers write white characters?", everybody has their own rhythm. What this is about, is the power of language to alter the spectator".

### **3. Space / Setting**

Again the group was asked to provide suggestions for the function of space:

*defining character, suspending the audience's belief, defining the context of the play; making the play 3 dimensional; operating symbolically; mediating the relationship between the world of the play and the world outside.*

Bonnie expounded:

"it is as if the dynamic of history is our raison d'être - how is it that a first time play from a Black writer will contain an illogical pattern of settings? The issue is that the setting is not literally about location. The setting is the incantatory space for the audience - to get them to the next stage of feeling."

### **4. What is the playwright's relationship to the audience?**

Again the group was asked to offer suggestions:

*manipulation; shamanic; storyteller; consent of the audience; to offer understanding; to synthesise, show meaning and experience; to show that anything can happen on a stage.*

“Black playwrights are shut out because they are not understood; confronted with inappropriate dramaturgy. Within Black writing is the possibility to liberate.....which is why it is important for us all.....”

Adrian Jackson (London Bubble) suggested that maybe there needed to be another, non-Western definition of this kind of work, other than a “play”.

Bonnie felt that the bottom line is that if you can't respect the shape, then the dramaturgy doesn't help. When asked “how do ‘the spirits’ and structure work together?” - Bonnie replied that the Aristotelian model is a way to take people through experience, but that if you use the 3 year old as an audience litmus test, to see what happens when you wed the circle and the line, you'll soon know if it works...

Bonnie's contention is that the playwright's relationship to the audience is to express something about themselves to empower the community, so that people are changed. She reiterated that within the divergent realms of Black playwriting, a Black dramaturgy could consist of the combination of time, words, space and the relationship of the playwright to the audience configured in this way.

## **Half Moon Young People's Theatre (HMYPT) and Maya Productions**

### **Young People's Writing**

Type of Session Panel Discussion

#### **Introduction**

**Angela Kelly** discussed the recent Half Moon YPT ten week writers course and **Chris Preston, Sita Ramamurthy** and **Suzy Gilmour** offered an insight into possible approaches to playwriting in schools based on Maya's 1995 *Outwrite* project in East London.

#### **Half Moon YPT**

Angela began by giving a brief background to the Half Moon YPT. She outlined it's successful survival after the closure of the 'main' theatre, and attributed this to its extensive and broad based outreach programme. Now located in their own building, the YPT aims to provide an access point for those interested in pursuing a professional career in theatre. This highly structured and motivated approach is reflected in the **Course Construct for *Write Now*** :

1. Introductions - What is a story ? What is a play ?
2. Common problems. Dramatic structure
3. Character. Write treatment during the week.
4. Delivery of treatment. Discussion re: development of treatments. Viewing of feature film.

5. Character and objectives. Shaping.
6. Delivery of first draft. A framework for feeding back.
7. First draft surgery.
8. delivery of second draft. Visiting speaker.
9. Surgery on second drafts.
10. whole group editorial meeting on second drafts.
11. Deliver rehearsal draft.
12. Rehearse play readings.

'*Write Now*' was a project initiated originally by Lin Coghlan as a way of developing the theatre writing of young people. In this instance the YPT was keen to raise the status of young people's writing and encourage those who already had a history of creative writing to apply their talents specifically to theatre.

To eliminate financial ineligibility it was crucial that the course was free and application to join could be made by all who expressed genuine interest. Candidates were selected by interview and a submitted piece of work. The most important criterion was realistic commitment to the course and the creation of an overall group dynamic. The clearly defined aim of finishing with a 30 min rehearsed reading, directed and performed by professionals was a significant motivating factor.

The intensity of the course, ten weeks with one three hour session a week, was seen to be a distinct advantage. The structure took the writers through a microcosm of the professional process and delivered the all important final performance. No one had time to be nervous and drop out and everyone was encouraged to be brave. One-to-one sessions and informal chats were mixed with group discussion.

Angela pointed out that it was crucial to develop a group strategy that focused on constructive criticism. There were rules on feedback to stop negativity

- What did you like about the draft ?
- What was interesting and moving?
- What would you like to know more about?
- What is the pace of the journey?

## **Discussion**

It was also apparent that theatre writing can be illuminated by relating its similarities and differences to other mediums that many young people are more familiar with, in particular TV and Film. This point was discussed at some length amongst the practitioners present, as fears were raised that writing 'treatments' would lead to short and essentially filmic first drafts. Angela pointed out that most finished pieces were whole scenes rather than fragmented narrative and mature in their awareness of theatrical stagecraft. Some used characters created in early sessions, others discarded them or added more. All in all the aim was to allow the individual to free their own voice rather than be tightly tied down by a rigid plan. Knowing that there was a final delivery date stopped this being too vague, even though many were cutting and adding right up to performance. After discussion the practitioners present generally agreed that rules of structure/form could be learnt by making clear the differences with other mediums, then by encouraging the writer to find their own voice within these 'rules', discarding that which is ultimately unhelpful.

## Maya

Chris, Sita and Suzy then outlined their experience of setting up young writers courses in secondary schools in the East London area. Chris spoke of his formative experiences of watching children invent stories and play for hours, sometimes presenting these pieces, other times completely contained in a world of their own making. The stimulation of imagination and development of tolerance and social skills were at the heart of his observations.

Both Chris and Sita felt strongly that young voices needed facilitating, particularly amongst groups not normally catered for: working class, Asian and Black. They co-founded Maya Productions for this purpose. Employing Suzy and another workshop leader, groups were established in Waltham Forest and Newham. Unlike Half Moon YPT the selection procedure and working progress were far less overtly structured. Suzy took part in English classes to encourage and form an interested group of 13-14yr olds. The main responsibility was to give them a good time as they learnt and developed their own theatrical voice.

Although the Maya project also ended with public performances of rehearsed readings that happily reflected the diversity in culture and age of those involved, the aim was primarily the stimulation of creative expression rather than the provision of a mirrored professional process that could provide a potential springboard into a writing career.

Suzy used a more sensualised, tactile approach, focused on achieving an articulate impression of the young persons world. So often young people don't trust their own world and what it has to say. Exercises like *the Alphabet game* (where the writer has to find a word that expresses his/her world, beginning with each letter of the alphabet) began to open things up and allowed a basis of trust to be established between the group and the workshop leader. Further games such as '*look through a keyhole and describe what you see*' are designed to free the imagination from the limits of its own understanding.

Like Half Moon YPT, Maya faced practical and theoretical problems. Both groups' practical problems were directly linked to resources. Half Moon YPT would have liked to have been able to employ actors to work at first draft stage. The problems of writers reading each others work out loud provoked widespread discussion. Whilst it is clear that good actors can make a bad script work, it was equally acknowledged that bad actors could make a good script sound terrible. However, it was deemed crucial that the work is explored three dimensionally and doesn't become frozen on the page. Perhaps this is an area where new exercises/skills need to be developed.

Maya provided bus services for the young people but access and concentration after school hours proved difficult, especially if sessions clashed with soccer !

Both groups had to work hard to create a common theatrical language. It was clear that few participants in either project had an extensive background in theatre. The members of the Half Moon YPT scheme were older and more aware of dramatic forms and possibilities, but both leaders organised theatre trips so that plays could be discussed alongside other mediums. This helped establish the meaning of terms such as 'protagonist.' More trips would have been beneficial in providing the young people with a broader experience of theatre and the range of potential that it offers.

## Discussion

Apart from more extensive funding, the final discussion centred on the problems of moving forwards. Half Moon YPT was considering setting up a support group meeting once every two or three months, but stressed that although their course has a 100% success rate, they cannot continue to provide consistent support to individual writers. One writer had been commissioned for a schools tour, but where do the rest go?

Similarly for Maya it was shown that the participants' English work had significantly improved, but without follow up work, trips to the theatre, further creative writing etc would this work dry up? Close and continuous contact with the teachers might be beneficial in this area, although again this relies on sufficient resources.

This issue moved the session into a generalised discussion on the gap between professional success and writers still enmeshed in the learning process. Should literary managers advise 'bad' writers to give up? Are 'bad' writers using up resources? How clear do theatres make their policies and how do they train their readers?

The panel firmly displayed their commitment to facilitating young people's means of expression, whether this be through a highly professionalised, independent approach or in a schools based exploratory programme. The importance of providing young people with theatrical experience in order to invest in the next generation of professionals was stressed, alongside the positives that such a mastering of expression can give any individual. The different aims of the two groups were accurately reflected in their approaches, with both achieving good degrees of effectiveness. Importantly they provide the initial spur to write. The question left hanging in the air was 'If the writer persists, where then do they go?'

## **Mentoring**

Type of Session: Panel Discussion

with **Margaret Sheehy, Marina Caldarone, Olusola Oyeleye, Maureen Lawrence, Jackie Everett.** Chair: **Astrid Hilne**

## Panellists

**Astrid Hilne** introduced the session by highlighting the usefulness and importance of Women's Theatre Workshop (WTW) and the New Playwrights Trust (NPT) working together through their respective Mentoring Schemes for Women Directors and Women Writers. Hilne began by contextualising the discussion. The idea of mentoring goes back to the 1980s, and particularly within large and multi-national industry. The foundation of the European Mentoring Centre meant the publication of more directed research within the field. The Directors Guild of Great Britain held a symposium which was followed up by Gulbenkian funded research in the 1980s in the publication *A Better Direction*. In 1994, with money from the Gulbenkian and Baring Foundations, WTW and NPT were able to launch their two schemes.

Hilne noted that the two schemes had been successful in different ways, and that it was important to take on board "what didn't work" as much as what did in the mentoring situation. The 'Mentoring Contract' or 'Agreement' was something which both schemes set up between mentor and mentee. Each mentoring set up differed within

the two schemes depending on the skills, backgrounds and experiences of the participants, and the particular needs of the mentee. However, a basic rubric was agreed, this being at least six one-hour meetings over a period of six months. Each scheme had a selection process which sought to match mentor with mentee, and carried a follow through period of review and feedback, and finally documentation in the case of NPT. Hilne noted that in the selection process 'compatibility' was the key. She also drew attention to these being pilot schemes which sought to be placed in the wider context of where "training is lacking" and how both schemes might be developed in the future.

**Margaret Sheehy** (Directing Mentor on the WTW scheme) felt that when she was a young director access was denied to "someone offering guidance", and that this was a point raised at numerous conferences on Women's Theatre in the 1980s. Mentoring, she felt, operated unofficially between men in the first instance, and was less apparent in the arts than in industry. Sheehy's experience was that "attaching yourself to someone" was a means of moving one's career forward, yet historically such activity proved mainly a male prerogative. This points significantly to the different experiences and career strategies of men and women.

Sheehy raised the question of "what do you look for?" in a guider or mentor, and observed how subsequent Artistic Directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company bore an uncanny physical resemblance to each other. In the 1980s the Arts Council operated a matching system where companies could propose someone to work with them. Such schemes are now fewer and far between yet point towards the perhaps unofficial means by which mentoring has operated in the British theatre. For Sheehy, the key is "making the mentoring match".

**Marina Caldarone** (Directing Mentor on the WTW scheme) said that she learnt much by being paired up with Toby Robertson at Theatre Clwyd. Yet, paradoxically, this was a relationship which only worked beautifully, once clear parameters had been set up

Caldarone drew attention to the definition of terms, and how words such as "assistant", "placement" and "mentor" may be combined but possibly carry different meanings. An assistant director may also be a mentee, but it is all too well known how open to abuse the assistant director position is. Caldarone was concerned that most careers within the British theatre structure provide little time for development, and that one of the benefits of the scheme for her was learning from the mentee.

**Olusola Oyeleye** (Directing Mentee on the WTW scheme) has worked extensively in theatre, opera, radio and film. Oyeleye asserted that no matter how successful you are, you still reach a point where "you need to look at your own practice and methodology". She had been asked constantly to be a mentor and has felt privileged to mentor several people, but now felt the need to be a mentee. The scheme had allowed her to this. "It doesn't matter where you are, there is still something to learn".

**Maureen Lawrence** (Writing Mentor on the NPT scheme) said that she was surprised to be asked to be a mentor. A playwright since 1985, she has had many more years experience as a novelist and as a teacher in higher education. Lawrence met a director who read one of her novels and through this meeting began writing plays. It was through working with directors and actors, Lawrence observed, that she really felt she learnt her craft - "the director becoming a self-appointed mentor from which work was generated".

Lawrence said that the first few meetings with Jackie Everett, her mentee, were quite formal and that it took quite a long time to be truthful. Both had come from literary backgrounds and the tendency to “describe too much” was a problem both faced in their writing.

Lawrence identified three principle ways in which she was able to help Jackie; the examination of a text; providing insight into the production process; and networking. Lawrence noted that she thought the second of these was a particular problem in the writers mentoring scheme, and that what Jackie needed now was a directing mentor.

**Jackie Everett** (Writing Mentee on the NPT scheme) said that it was psychologically helpful to be selected for the scheme, and that she no longer had to regard herself as a “closet writer”. Everett had herself been mentored in another professional capacity, and when taking over a new position had found the process useful. She had also been a mentor to students.

Everett felt that sharing “common ground” with Lawrence was an important starting point, and from this getting to know each other’s work lead to a shared experience, though within the actual mentoring sessions this never became a script surgery. Everett and Lawrence also went to plays together, and would “re-write” these plays. This “seeing and talking endlessly” removed Everett from what she describes as the “sitting by the TV syndrome”.

Everett viewed Lawrence’s background in teaching as a commitment and means to “enabling”, of “sharing what you know”. She also felt the partnership was helped by the intensity of meeting in Yorkshire as opposed to London, away from any distraction. Everett views the experience of mentoring as “a practical, not a philosophical process”.

## Discussion

Astrid Hilne reiterated the point that these two schemes were the first recorded incidents that mentoring had been systematically explored as a training method in the arts in this country. One point raised was that “mentoring is not about giving work”. Margaret Sheehy pursued this further, making the distinction between “mentoring as learning and training and mentoring as career development”. In business and industry mentoring follows a more structured relationship. Although it was generally accepted that the mentoring process should not be about “job opportunities”, it was possible that mentors could prove significant in getting mentees work. A distinction was made here between the status of directors and writers; that directors, particularly artistic directors are in a position to give both writers and directors work, but this rarely applies to even the most established and experienced of writers.

“Someone with ‘status’ is not necessarily a mentor”.

## Outcomes

NPT will seek to publish its report on the Women Writers Mentoring Scheme, and from that develop a strategy of mentoring as a training method in a range of contexts. Although no further funds have become available, WTW is now embarking on a second scheme. NPT will similarly wish to see the scheme continued through developing a range of contacts with individuals and professional bodies.

# Writing Drama for the Radio

Type of Session: Master class

## Introduction

This session was designed as a stimulus for writers new to radio. Richard Shannon, from Independent Radio Drama Productions and Jeremy Mortimer, from BBC Radio 4 played a series of extracts to illuminate the art of writing for radio. Both producers outlined the commercial possibilities available to writers in radio.

## **Illustrations**

Jeremy started by playing a quite complex piece which contained mixed narrative in order to highlight the way in which radio drama tells its stories through images as well as words. He stressed the wonderful subjectivity of radio, and the way that acoustic movement ie close microphone, distant microphone, can move the listener backwards and forwards in relation to the characters. The careful delivery of clues concerning location and era, the richness of a voice that can bring with it a sense of class, age and character all contribute to the world of radio drama. Everyone sees a different picture in their head when listening to a drama, this is unequivocally not merely television with the sound turned down.

One of the group asked whether a writer would be expected to include such detail in their scripts. Jeremy encourages all writers of any level to develop their work so that atmosphere, silence and general FX are as important as words and are part of any submitted work. This helps ensure that the writer is creating a full soundscape and not a play without pictures. It is also useful to bring commissioned writers into the final stages of production. Not only can they then contribute to the overall sound of their piece, but they can learn new and different techniques to use in future work.

Most importantly Jeremy stressed the way in which the subtext of radio drama is often told through evasion rather than direct verbal response. On stage an actor can look away or suddenly exit, in radio another element is usually introduced, rain perhaps to suggest mood, or the passing of time. This is all part of finding a language which addresses the idea of movement without anything ever actually being seen. It's a highly suggestive form, where the combination of words, voices and FX can create a language that allows the listener to follow the objectivity of the play's dramatic narrative within their own subjective mental picture of events.

Richard further emphasised the impressionistic dream state that radio can create. He indicated the poeticism at the heart of the form, which is itself an anti realistic medium. Citing the example of Beckett's radio plays, he went on to display just how fragile the world created in radio drama really is. This is what provides it with the incredible potential for surprise. If half way through a play, Beckett mentions that his character has a hat on, the listener is then forced to filter back through their earlier images and recreate them. The writer has succeeded in surprising the listener with new information and has at the same time shattered the old world of the play and created a new one.

Often the writer will bring the listener close to the central character, increasing the subjectivity of the medium. Richard played two extracts which perfectly illustrated his

point. One was of an opera singer locked in a room backstage before his opening entrance. The listener was placed in the room with the character, hearing exactly what he could hear; the tannoy relaying action on stage, the noise from the backstage corridors and finally the voice of the jealous actor who had deliberately locked him in. For the character, as for the listener, the perpetrator's physical representation is held from him and he can only imagine what he might find when the door is finally unlocked.

Both men stressed that radio drama is also an excellent form for exploring the subconscious. Unlike theatre, characters don't have to be brought down stage centre, they can appear and disappear suddenly, or fade away completely, within the mind/memory of the central character. Similarly the FXs work subjectively to the characters state, rather than objectively as you would hear them in everyday life.

All the participants in this session were radio enthusiasts who listened to World Service drama, Radio 4 and independent radio drama. Jeremy handed out a guide to writing for radio and outlined the process of commissioning. Richard admitted that there were far fewer opportunities in the commercial sector but that he was still running the London Radio Playwrights Competition and all ages/abilities are eligible to enter.

The workshop gave an excellent taste of radio drama and the participants seemed clearer about what the producers wanted from them when submitting scripts. This certainly whetted the writers' appetites and both producers expressed a willingness to talk to other writers groups in order to promote the work. Perhaps the next stage would be to give selected writers pilot time in the studio to allow them to explore more fully the vast potential that radio drama has to offer.

# David Edgar

## A look at the use of devices in drama

Type of Session: Master class

### Introduction

David Edgar has had plays produced by the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company, recently winning an Evening Standard award for his play *Pentecost*, produced by the RSC. For seven years he has been Chair of the MA in Playwriting Studies at the University of Birmingham, the first course of its kind in this country. This session draws from the foundation element to that course.

and will provide an introduction about plays and scenes and, in more detail, about devices.

### The distinction between story, plot and action

1. the story (fabula) is what happens in the story expressed chronologically.
2. the plot (sjuzet) is what happens in the story in the way it is told in the play.
3. the action is the meaning of the play as it is expressed in the plot.

Therefore, the plot is the way the story is presented dramatically in order to reveal the action. The purpose of the plotting is to tell the story in a way to reveal the play's meaning as expressed in the action.

Actions are the most difficult to define. A workable action, or contains a project (described in a subject, verb, object way) but also a reversal (often expressible as a clause starting with the word "but").

### The elements of scenes

In looking at scenes three useful elements are offered for consideration:

1. the programme is the shopping list of things the writer needs to get into a scene: main plot developments, introducing new characters, reiteration of names, incidents and set-ups for later.
2. the construct contains a project (the fundamental event of a scene) and a contradiction, which may be a reversal, twist or an irony. The construct is in effect the action of a scene.

This can be demonstrated through a scene from the second episode of Peter Flannery's *Our Friend's in the North*. The scene is about a marriage in difficulty. He wants to be a pop star, she thinks he is having an affair. It is a 'little play'. A deal is struck that two questions will be answered honestly. One is. The other is answered honestly but unexpectedly. The contract is kept but not in the way we anticipated. This is an action, revealed by a story expressed in a plot.

3. the situation, format and business. All scenes are set within some kind of recognisable situation of human interaction with its various roles and familiar protocols. (e.g. a family meal) which may imply business (e.g. eating). Sometimes, the situation contains the means by which the construct is revealed. In this case, the situation is the format of the scene, and the associated business is the direct expression of a dramatic action.

For example:

the programme of the first scene of *King Lear* is huge, and includes Lear's abdication, the elevation of Goneril and Regan and the banishment of Cordelia and Kent.

The construct of this scene is that a king seeks to discover which daughter loves him most, but picks the wrong ones.

The format of the King Lear scene is the setting of the test. The disruption of the scenario contains the scene's meaning (Cordelia's refusal to play the game by the rules exposes Lear's selfishness and pride).

The format's structure therefore reflects that of the construct: the project of the scene is expressed in the undisrupted scenario. The reversal - the bit after the but - is expressed by the disruption.

### How do devices work?

Theatre is a two-sense medium (sight and hearing), therefore a two-dimensional medium (operating in both space and time). There are moments when the event is only operating on one plane, though rarely: a silence is always about time, and a scene set in the dark is not radio. Both have to be present and if they aren't you don't have a play

### *Devices*

The following are devices largely about **time**:

The most obvious clock device is the task that has to be completed before something happens, on which there are infinite variations; countless countdowns to explosions or executions. At other times we know something or someone is going or coming, but not always precisely when.

One great clock scene in drama is in Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*. The plot of the scene is that the character Joseph Surface has got his mistress Lady Teazle into his room in order to seduce her. Faced with a series of highly inappropriate visitors, he has hidden her behind a screen from both his brother Charles (who does not know any one is there) and Lord Teazle himself (who does, but does not know that it is Lady Teazle). The tension of the scene is upped by the small clock of Lady Sneerwell waiting downstairs, to whom Joseph is forced to go to keep her there, but the main clock is the conventional expectation that the screen will fall.

Reading this scene also reveals the second major time-device at a playwright's disposal, which is the manipulation of tempo. The music of the sequence is shaped around the waited and delayed interventions of the two exposed persons in the scene: Joseph Surface and Lady Teazle.

Two of the elements used within that scene may also be found frequently elsewhere. The first is the drop line, the long, often repetitive speech followed by a puncturing moment. In a scene from Caryl Churchill's *Ice Cream* where Jaq is speaking to Vera, the drop line confirms what has gone before; it is funny because it echoes what we are thinking. By contrast, in *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare punctuates a huge speech by Adriana to the man she believes to be her husband, with a line which is a complete surprise.

A third time device is figuring - the various techniques by which playwrights set-up, reiterate, pay off and indeed echo lines, themes, character traits, plot points and devices throughout the play. The skill of this technique is to make the set-ups and reiterations memorable without revealing the architecture. The most obvious way of doing this, as Wilde constantly proves, is to disguise the set-up as a joke. A set-up may equally appear disguised as a character or even a plot.

Encoding, and codes that can be changed, are immensely communicative. In *The Madness of George III*, Alan Bennett encoded the phrase "what what?" as a mannerism of George and reiterates it by noting that once mad he doesn't use it any more. The phrase is thus encoded as representing the King's health, and when we hear it again, we know he is cured. The audience has laughed at the set-up and they laugh again at the pay off.

The fact that drama can operate in time but not space (on the radio), but not in space without time is an index of the relative importance of time devices, but it is also worth talking about devices connected with **space**:

The first decision about a scene is the location and the angle on its events. We know of the traditional Shakespeare court scene and battle. There are however a number of scenes in which Shakespeare sees great events from the sidelines. In *Troilus and Cressida*, the return of the Trojan army from battle is seen from the point of view of two watchers on the battlements; in *The Winter's Tale* and *Henry VIII* great events at court are related as gossip by conveniently meeting citizens in the street.

The nature of the setting can imply what surrounds it. Edward Bond is expert in setting the scene within a special configuration; we are always made aware of the next door room, the nearby village, the opposite bank of the river. Perhaps Bond learnt this from Brecht, whose scenes almost always imply offstage; notably in the climactic scene of *Mother Courage* in which the dumb Katrin climbs on an on-stage roof to bang a drum to warn a town in the valley below of an imminent attack.

Once within a scene, a playwright must decide on the configuration of characters on stage. The first act of *Hedda Gabler*, is a masterful demonstration of getting people on and off stage in order to allow aspects of plot and character to be revealed. The act is primarily built around three conversations between Hedda and her husband, her friend Mrs Elvsted and Judge Brack. In the latter two cases, Hedda speaks with Mrs Elvsted and then Brack with Tesman and then gets rid of him in order to have a tête à tête. As a result of this we see Hedda acting in an array of different configurations.

Once configured, there is a repertoire of devices which reconfigure the stage: entrances and exits, including dummy exits and visual interruptions. The tavern scene in *Henry IV Part I* is built around three interruptions from outside. *The School for Scandal* screen scene is built around a massive reconfiguration.

Finally, there is also visual figuring, the use of physical objects that are encoded with meaning and reused. In Charlotte Keatley's *My Mother Said I Never Should*, which is about four generations of women and the relationship between their hopes and reality, there are running through the play various objects that are important to the characters at various points in their lives. Like all objects they are superficially banal: a doll, some flowers, a piano, painting things, a wartime utility mug, some photographs and a single red sock. Having set up this language, Keatley keeps her best coup till last, when we learn that the grass stained dress that the grandmother finds among her things was soiled on the day she lost her virginity. Her description of this moment, as if at the age of 20, is the first thing that happens chronologically but the last thing that happens in the plot of the play.

Richest of all are those devices in which time and space contrast with one another, in which meaning is produced by dissonance. Love in a graveyard. The Judas kiss. The boss tucking into his dessert and preaching belt-tightening. The puritan condemning vice while his mistress listens from behind a screen. In all cases, the contrast between what is seen and what is heard means that a dissonance is being noted, a convention is being manipulated, a surprise is being pulled, a change being rung, a rule broken.

### Conclusion

To end at the beginning. Aristotle wrote: "Tragedy is the representation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents that awaken pity and fear, and effects of this kind are heightened when things happen unexpectedly as well as logically, for then they will be more remarkable than if they seem merely mechanical or accidental." The balance between the project and the reversal, the expected and the surprising, the familiar and the strange, is noted by Aristotle and exemplified in the first lines of two plays one might see as bookending the 2,500 years of drama that we know about. The first line of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is "Ye Gods when will it end". The first line of Beckett's *Endgame* is "Finished. It's finished".

## Plenary Session

### Closing thoughts

Jack Bradley began the closing session with a call to glean consensus on what took place during these four days of shared workshop practice. Although Developing Theatre Writing had clearly embodied a variety of methods, starting points and assumptions - a quality in itself - it was perhaps "the meeting points" between demonstrated ideas and practice which many participants felt distinguished the event.

A central question raised was, "For who has this been and what for?" For the dramaturg, "How do I intervene?" For the teacher, "How do I teach?" For the director, "What is my role?"

The writer and dramaturg Bonnie Greer began the discussion by asserting that particular skills within particular activities need recognising. The Black play needs to be appreciated in a particular way, and how far do literary departments take account of this?

London Theatre Literary Director Tony Craze pointed to the distinction between new writing and new work and literary departments being able to distinguish between the more traditional "dialogue script" and scripts which engage with current interdisciplinary practice. Is more lateral thinking required within the contemporary practice of new performance writing?

A recognised problem was the volume of work and time spent on unsolicited work and the need for a better strategy which might release the literary manager from the garret. The position of the literary manager remains far too re-active and needs to be pro-active.

Sue Parrish of the Sphinx spoke of "generating work to whom?" Is the workshop being too enclosed with writers creating a real problem, making such workshops self-serving? Do we require a more (perhaps nationally) developed networking system of scripts and writers. Within all of this "new writing has to be good".

Attention was drawn to the difference between building based, small scale and fringe companies, how despite the lack of resources development was happening across the board to varying degrees of effect and quality.

A culture of containment exists. From the national companies to writing groups in the regions, communication needs to be opened up, and widening the perceptions of the gate-keepers as to what is happening needs to be encouraged.

The status of training must be raised. The establishment of performance writing courses in higher education is now being accompanied by agencies such as the New Playwrights Trust operating the pilot Mentoring Scheme for Women Writers. Training practices and methodologies largely remain unacknowledged by the sector at large.

David Edgar pointed to the current status of the British musical as replicating a Hollywood model. There are many musicals in development. A small percentage of these reach production and even fewer becomes smash hits. It is a system perfectly familiar in the film and television industries. Do we want such a system in the the-

atre for new work? A system which by its very nature can all too easily promote exclusion on cultural and aesthetic criterion, and not only on so-called 'quality'.

David Edgar also pointed to the importance of agencies such as North West Playwrights and the New Playwrights Trust being able to work together at a grass-roots level, and how, over the past ten years, such organisations had proved crucial to the continuation of new work in the British theatre, from providing information to writers to offering workshops which has meant putting writers on the career ladder.

### What Happens Next?

There were many calls for *Developing Theatre Writing* to be repeated, though perhaps in a somewhat different form. Sue Parrish suggested it could operate more as a laboratory, with not so many practitioners holding sessions and more of an emphasis on the present tense. It was felt that the training of literary managers and dramaturgs was an area which particularly needed to be addressed. Cheryl Robson of Women's Theatre Workshop called for a greater emphasis on the sharing of dramaturgical process. Jack Bradley spoke of the need to reach as wide a spectrum of the industry as possible. And Bonnie Greer said we should not be afraid of opting for the dangerous, of going underground....