

Enlivening the Psychodramatist as Writer: Lessons from Great Writers

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ABSTRACT

There is a wide roaming pack of existential fools, mavericks and strangers in strange lands. Some are writers. Some are great. The great writers have achieved a working practice of spontaneity, purpose and craft. They are alchemists working with the exhilarating power of production. They engage readers as active participants in the emerging human experience, not explaining things but crafting them in a way that the reader can experience them. Their works and their lives lived are treasures for the apprentice writer. This paper presents some of these treasures. It is designed for the psychodrama enthusiast who has been keen to bring the life of the stage to the page.

KEYWORDS

production, spontaneity training, writers, writing

Over the past few years of obsession with writing, I have had a strong desire for my writing to be rich with the synchronicity, spontaneity and surprise that are achieved on the psychodramatic stage. I anticipated that psychodramatic sensibilities would inform my writing. I was not naïve. I knew work was required. Those in the know had written it in large letters, repeatedly and in blood: there are no shortcuts. I thought I understood. Then, there was the finding out of the awful truth.

On a chilly morning in Russia in 1849, as vividly described by Henry Troyat (1946), a young Feodor Dostoevsky was taken from his dungeon to meet his fate. It could not be possible that he was to be executed. He had not been involved with a band of conspirators but a literary interest group. It would be exile to a Siberian labour camp at worst. He was taken to a field. There was scaffolding and a crowd and soldiers with rifles. Other

prisoners had been brought there. His colleagues. There was a priest and the priest led them to a place with three posts. It could not be possible that they were to be executed. He was a royalist. There was no conspiracy. He found himself standing next to his friend Mombelli. He had the impulse to tell his friend about the theme of a new story he had conceived of in his dungeon.

I laughed. I was not alone. Here was another madman. I laughed and invited myself in to be part of this. These writers. This wide roaming pack of existential fools, mavericks and strangers in strange lands. I could belong to that. There would be pathways for me the apprentice, warnings of dead ends and cesspools, some tricks and tools. They had succeeded, and in that, they had achieved some working practice of spontaneity, purpose and craft. I wanted to learn from them.

I have become increasingly fascinated with these writers and the things they have said about their creative process. In this article, I offer a few insights I have learned in my encounters with them. I hope they will be useful to those who want their writing to have more life. The writing could be of story or it could be of your psychodramatic work. There is also much that is of relevance to production on the stage.

Inhabit

When a role in the protagonist's world is first concretised on the psychodramatic stage, we often want the producer to chat with them, to be curious and interview them so we can appreciate their world. We benefit when the interviewing for role is spacious and details are made known. Writers are very involved in this endeavour. For example, the writer Toni Morrison describes to Koval (2001:353) that she wants:

. . . to make sure that if I imagine a character and fully realise that character, I can look at the world the way that character does. And it's not a question of justification; it's a question of bearing witness to a certain kind of individual and getting it right. Whether they turn out to be mostly bad or mostly good — or usually somewhere in between — is due to the nature of their own experiences and their own background and what they thought about and what they've been able to imagine.

The writer inhabits a character and dwells in their world. Sometimes, these are characters no one else has got to know. In psychodrama, we have the extraordinary gift of auxiliary work. I have got to say things, feel things and move in ways I would never otherwise have done. Likewise, writers of story get to journey into new worlds and new ways of being. Witness Irene Nemirovsky (2004:396) at fourteen:

. . . settled on the sofa, notebook on her lap, she developed a technique inspired by Ivan Tur-

genev. As well as the narrative itself, she would write down all the ideas the story inspired in her, without any revision or crossing out. She filled notebook upon notebook with thoughts about her characters, even the minor ones, describing their appearance, their education, their childhood, all the stages of their lives in chronological order. When each character had been detailed to this degree of precision, she would use two pencils, one red, the other blue, to underline the essential characteristics to be retained; sometimes only a few lines. She would then move quickly on to writing the novel, improving it, then editing the final version.

“Sometimes only a few lines.” Perhaps that could be called a role description. Perhaps, I could formulate a role description as a production with red and blue pencils. I might imagine myself as Irene, fourteen and on a sofa, ready to be entertained.

Produce

All writers are producers. Not all writers inhabit a character as their main means to reach into a situation and see what happens. Some build their stories from dialogue. Stephen King can begin with something as minimal as two characters and a predicament stated in one paragraph. Some writers begin with the essence of the story imagined as a painting or heard as a piece of music. With the novel *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner said he “. . . simply imagined a group of people and subjected them to the simple universal nature catastrophes which are flood and fire with a simple motive to give direction to their progress” (Gorra, 2010:188).

In all these approaches, the writer is a producer, fascinated with their response to the thing produced. John Gardner (1983:142) put it like this. “So I propose in a piece of fiction that a certain man had three hundred sons, all redheads, and I muse on what that makes me say next.” *What that makes me say next.* What a wizard of a victim he is. What a freedom. Walter the psychodramatic producer says to the protagonist, “Go and be your granddaughter”. “But, I don’t have a granddaughter,” the protagonist says. “Do it anyway,” Walter says, “Let’s see what the future has to say about you”.

Sometimes, I touch the deep mystery of production and see it as an unfolding story of relationship. I imagine the first breeze on the new butterfly’s wet wings as a production. The wings wake up to their nature. And then there is a flight and that is another production which evokes yet further experience. I salute the psychodramatists who have added to the rich tradition of unscripted play upon the stage. I salute the writers who have danced their stories upon the page. I celebrate that these are not elite clubs.

Stage or page, anyone can join in and produce whatever their hearts desire or minds imagine. Take a blank page of the finest paper and your coloured pencils and we will call that the invitation to play. Perhaps, you might even do that now. Write of your experience or write of your fancy. Make an expression. And then

look and listen. Look, listen and know what it is that that expression evokes in you. And even if it is not what you want — even if it is that tired old critic that has been with you since the beginning of adventure — then have that critic choose a colour and make their response and then find out what that evokes.

Perhaps we could experiment with telling the story of a psychodrama from a voice other than a producer or a clinician. It could be told from one of the roles in the system. Notice the sensibilities that Toni Morrison (Koval, 2001:354) is entertaining in her story telling:

In this book I didn't want to be the omnipotent voice and I needed someone else and I chose this woman, L., who was the chef in this hotel. But she had to live the whole thing, and so she's dead for some of the book . . . I needed the space. I needed to stand back from that voice. I wanted an 'I' that was not the author. I didn't want to confuse that voice with a character who actually functioned in that house and manipulated people and concludes certain activity. She's very much part of the narrative of that story. I was able in some books to have a tone that could work, like in Paradise I was able to do it. Even in Beloved I was able to have a kind of distant, all-knowing but comfortable, I think, voice that the reader trusted. But in some instances I don't want the reader to trust the voice. In Jazz I wanted a narrator that was wrong most of the time, or could make a mistake. The same thing here — I didn't want the reader to be that comfortable in that voice. I wanted the edge, so that the participation of the reader would be more edgy, more intact, in a sense.

Enter, You and Me

There is no spectator position in a psychodrama. There is no spectator position in the reading of a book. Like Toni Morrison, other novelists work very consciously with the craft of engaging participation from a reader. The book *The Story Begins* by Amos Oz (1999) fascinated me with its analysis of the different 'contracts' that writers such as Chekhov, Kafka, Raymond Carver and Marquez offer their readers. An extraordinary set of tricks and seductions. "The confounding of simple expectation — the *not* telling us what it was that Maisie knew — is a way to simulate the reader to a fuller exercise of his imagination: to make him *read* in a more exalted sense (*not* devour)" (Kermode, 1983:95-96).

A relationship is formed between writer and reader where both are active co-creators. It is a collaborative experiment. The reader enters into the truth of the fictional dream and the writer receives such a reader and commits to being with them. If the writer as an alchemist has invited readers to participate in the mystery of human consciousness, then we will want them to remain present for all stages of the cooking.

The skilful writer values the reader's willingness and trust so much, she must craft the writing so the reader gets to have the experience of surprise and the unknown. Such a writer does not want the reader to know about something. She wants the fingertips to touch it, the itch that has been at the bones to be scratched,

the eyes to pop open a new pathway to the heart.

If, as psychodramatists, we do not want our commentaries to be read as a linear plod or a dry analysis, if we do not want to find our writing has had the mystery squeezed out of it, then we must take up this awful challenge. It is not enough to write about surprise. We must be crazy ambitious enough to offer the reader the experience of surprise.

There are exercises designed for this ambition. This one of John Gardner's (1983:203) is a favourite. It opened me up to a whole range of ways of narrating a story so that the affective mood of the character can be experienced directly. "Describe a building as seen by a man whose son has just been killed in a war. Do not mention the son, war, death or the old man doing the seeing; then describe the same building, in the same weather, at the same time of day, as seen by a happy lover. Do not mention love or the loved one."

I wanted more than exercises. I wanted my psychodramatic warm ups to surrender and spontaneity to come to me as a writer. I wanted to cultivate an attitude to the blank stage of the page. Bob Dylan's (2004:56) description of his artistic gestation helped. "I trained my mind to do this, had cast off gloomy habits and learned to settle myself down . . . I began cramming my brain with all kinds of deep poems."

Execute

The priest on the scaffolding proclaimed to the gathered that the wages of sin were death. He offered his icy cross to the condemned. Dostoevsky could kiss his icy cross. The drums beat, the trumpets sounded and the first three prisoners were tied to the posts. Hoods drawn over their heads and the firing squad came forward. Dostoevsky was in the next row. He calculated he had five minutes left to live. He decided he would spend two minutes to say farewell to his friends, two minutes for his family members and one minute to cast a last glance upon the world.

Do I need a gun to my head before I will say what I mean and write what must be written? I have heard the writers. "Just write," they say. "One word after another," says Stephen King. Others speak of rapture. William Faulkner describes "... that emotion definite and physical and yet nebulous to describe: that ecstasy, that eager and joyous faith and anticipation of surprise which the yet unmarred sheet beneath my hand held inviolate and unfailing, waiting for release" (Gorra, 2010:185-186). Many people split the experience into inspiration and perspiration and ask which is more important. I do not know if that split is accurate or useful for me. I prefer John Gardner's (1983:120) description of 'flow'. It feels like the psychodramatic stage:

. . . the writer forgets the words he has written on the page and sees, instead, his characters

moving around their rooms, hunting through cupboards, glancing irritably through the mail, setting mousetraps, loading pistols. The dream is as alive and compelling as one's dreams at night, and then the writer writes down on paper what he has imagined, the words, however inadequate, do not distract his mind from the fictional dream but provide him with a fix on it, so that when the dream flags he can reread what he's written and find the dream starting up again.

I did writing exercises where the output delighted and amazed me. I got down a paragraph in an inspired state. I even got a chapter or two and saw a novel. I wanted a novel. But it was not going to be achieved in one gulp of determination. Early success became a tyrant. I manipulated characters to serve some clever idea of plot or I hacked at the plot to suit some idea I had of a character. My ambition turned into a stubborn mule. The necessity for the effort to be sustained over months in order for the work to be done, activated other things and the pearly gates to inspiration closed. Here I was, a psychodramatist certified in a method explicitly dedicated to spontaneity, yet I was cast again and again upon the barren lands when writing. So, I crept back up onto my knees and had another go.

I look around for the voice that says "It's all in the warm up". I want to beat it to a pulp . . . because? Because it is dismissive, condescending, smug . . .? Let us call that the warm up. That is my warm up. Whatever I am warmed up to . . . it is mine. I expect at some point, by good fortune or not, through trying or not trying, that spontaneity will split me open, have my feet sunk into the earth and my fingers thrust up to drink in the skylight. So, there is some wild cocktail of hope and desperation in me but not enough coherence to give sufficient form to the something, whatever it is. I do not know. This is the place I find myself when writing at times. Just like this paragraph, not quite sensible.

I discovered a treasure, Dorothea Brande (1934). She offers spontaneity training for writers. She offers step by step instructions on getting discipline and inspiration into a cooperative working relationship. She asks that I become a stranger in my own street and put what I notice into definite words before I abandon it to the manipulation of the unconscious. Do that before the critic gets going, she says. Have a sleep or go for a walk. Do something repetitive and monotonous. And then come back and do what you must with the work and after that, let the critic do its fine job of editing and arranging. I took her advice and benefited. I knew that going about trying to obtain certain things through force of will would be the very thing that defeated my purpose. Brande guided me to settle into the unknown, to evoke stillness in the disturbed place.

I also received William Faulkner's advice. "A young writer would be a fool to follow a theory. Teach yourself by your own mistakes; people learn only by error. The good artist believes no one is good enough to give him advice. He has supreme vanity" (Gorra, 2010:188). A certain type of resilience and tough skin would be useful if I was going to be exposing myself and unwittingly participating

in follies and revealing deformities I did not know I had.

It appears a devotion has been developing in me. I ride this devotion through the creative process. I imagine I am like the young Bob Dylan (2004) in the gestation of his first song. He took many years gathering all the different elements that were needed for him to craft the song that he was wanting to perform but no one had written. One element was the song Pirate Jenny. He “. . . wanted to figure out how to manipulate and control this particular structure and form which I knew was the key that gave Pirate Jenny its resilience and outrageous power” (p.276). He “. . . began fooling around” and “. . . liked the idea of doing it but the song didn't come off. I was missing something”. Then the “. . . bells went off”. He remembered Suze and Arthur Rimbaud's words *Je est un autre* (I is someone else). There was a catharsis of integration with what he had embodied of Pirate Jenny, Woody Guthrie's union meeting sermons and Robert Johnson's dark night of the soul. He was “. . . straight into it. It was wide open. One thing for sure, not only was it not run by God, it wasn't run by the devil either” (p.293). For those who had not been looking, it appeared to be an immaculate conception.

Emergence

The knowledge that all writers have put in gigantic struggles also calms me. I reflect on the difficulties I have had in coming up with role descriptions that are precise and individualistic and I have a gentler attitude and patience for the work needed. Examination of the history of storytelling has also generated a very useful perspective. Story telling has been moving from the form of epic tales and fables into the more psychological form of the novel. I like to see that our struggles with role description are within that wider movement. Perhaps it is an evolutionary impulse.

Of the characters in the early forms, Jane Smiley (2005:342) says “. . . their sentiments are high, low, exalted, tender, grand, unmixed. In other words, they are poetic sentiments spoken by poetically conceived characters — the wise father, the perfect friend, the beautiful and virtuous young woman. Much of the narrative is dialogue, but it is ideal rather than vernacular language”. In the novel, the characters are no longer emblems or symbols of something, not solely evil or solely good, but they are protagonists possessed of agency. The action occurs as a result of the psychology of the characters.

So, I say to my role description, “Go and be released into the luxurious truth of a whole paragraph. Give yourself a whole chapter. Indulge yourself with a whole novel if you must. Role theory, you need not be so lonely and carry such a burden of responsibility”.

The precision and craft we have built up in our dramatic production can infuse and inform our writing and vice versa. There is a dance between stage and page and we are the dance and dancers, we are the band, we are the music. When a book is read or a story heard, it becomes living again and there is the opportunity

for further acts of creativity. Bruno Bettelheim (1975:150) expresses the gestation of a fairy tale:

... the folk fairy tale is the result of a story being shaped and reshaped by being told millions of times, by different adults to all kinds of other adults and children. Each narrator as he told the story, dropped and added elements to make it more meaningful to himself and to the listeners, whom he knew well. When talking to a child, the adult responded to what he surmised from the child's reactions. Thus the narrator let his unconscious understanding of what the story told be influenced by that of the child. Successive narrators adapted the story according to the questions the child asked, the delight and fear he expressed openly or indicated by the way he snuggled up against the adult.

If psychodrama is tasting life twice, the second time with laughter, then let us taste again and then again and again. I set up some groups to make sociodramatic inquiries into the emerging story of the machine. I took some dynamics and characters from our findings and crafted a fable (Carter, 2010). The editor in chief of a computing journal said it was unusual but he liked it.

If we are bold, we will not become entrenched in the restrictive ideas of corporate academia. We will be leaders in the living descriptions of our psychodramatic work, descriptions that honour the truth of the story and offer the invitation to participate. Literature has the same intent as psychodrama: to uplift the human spirit, open the mind, psyche and body, and invite us all to be participants. Let us not walk blindly in the spiritual vacuum of our modern institutions, caught up in their survival mechanisms. At least, let us be undercover agents. And if we find ourselves to be cowards, then let us plead that we were just in it for the fun.

In that field in Russia, the soldiers were ordered to lower their rifles. The hoods of the three men were taken off and the prosecutor stepped forth and read commutation of the sentence. A pardon, by way of the infinite clemency of His Majesty the Emperor. Feodor Dostoevsky was sent to hard labour. Twenty years later he told his wife that he could not recall any day as happy as that one.

His colleague, Grigoriev went insane.

Dostoevsky had material.

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