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ARTICLE

Educating Politicians as Playwrights: Toward a Sustainable World in Creative Conflict

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If drama is the art of making the unseen visible, it is also the art of getting into the skin of another. This fundamental act of immersion and suspended judgment forms an extraordinary opportunity for teaching the power of point of view, examining contrary arguments about an issue, examining personal assumptions and boundaries, and illustrating what it takes to create and maintain justice and democracy. This paper tries to show how educating politicians as playwrights could help create the conditions for a democratic, sustainable polity to emerge.

We were in the middle of a discussion of a job description for a new position in our innovative, interdisciplinary, liberal arts college. I was pointing out the ways in which a knowledge of the arts can make apperceptions of diversity and difference more vivid, more intensely experienced. Without any introduction to the art of acting, I simply alleged that “getting into the skin of another...this fundamental act of immersion and suspended judgment forms an extraordinary opportunity for teaching the power of point of view, examining contrary arguments about an issue, [and for] examining personal assumptions and boundaries...” My faculty colleagues heard me out, but the first response came quickly: “But if you do that, I certainly hope you also deal with the *limitations* of getting into the skin of another.”

It was like an admonishment. I had tread on what was the sacred, or at least the tender, territory of appropriation. But I would like to argue here that it is the very tenderness of that territory that gives it its extraordinary educational value, and pushes the envelope both of what we can teach about difference, and how we teach it. Finding a way into this tender territory can help our students learn and practice the encounters with persons who are deeply different, who have different beliefs and convictions. I would argue that such encounters are vital to anyone’s effectiveness as a citizen of a democracy. I submit that the capacity to talk and work with those persons who do not share our points of view, to be engaged in a civic process both because and in spite of our differences, is the essence of strong democracy. A democracy so constructed becomes strong by being capable of solving problems and moving forward. It becomes durable by being flexible enough to be self-perpetuating. It has a chance to be self-perpetuating, in my view, if the polity sanctions and teaches these core skills: the capacity to work with and through difference to construct civil laws, institutions, amenities, opportunities, and protections.

As we all know, perhaps with a combination of sympathy and considerable pain, this is not easy either to do or to teach. Let me describe an example. One way to invite students into the skins of others is to have them create dramatic scenes in which there is a conflict between two people with differences. One quickly encounters the fact that between any two individuals the differences multiply quickly. Assuming for the sake of simplicity that the two conflicting individuals share the same basic background, the same broad sets of cultural and lifecycle assumptions, and even the same gender, they are still unlikely feel or think about most things the same way. They won’t have identical histories or memories, and their dispositions and ways of approaching situations will probably be different. Their points of agreement may seem incidental or even random. It is no wonder that young would-be dramatic writers, when given an exercise to write a one- or two-page conflict between two (and only two) individuals, sometimes drown themselves in what they see immediately as the hopeless complications of such a simple scene, or, on the other hand, they cope with those complications by oversimplifying the conflict. A common question is: “How can we know enough about these people to write the scene?”

There are a number of workable answers to this question, but whichever one is chosen, to make the task do-able, the teacher must be honest with the student about the risk involved. The writer must risk being wrong, risk writing a scene which has no resonance and does not ring true. It can seem perfectly true to life that some people will condense their whole sensibilities into stubborn conflict with someone else, even on a minor issue, while for others that same pattern can seem forced and artificial. But writing the scene badly is typically a good prelude to revising it and writing it well. Without being willing to write badly, one may end up with nothing to revise.

This is another way of stating the huge risk for the student. It re-frames the question (and the terrible burden of judgment) of whether one is writing a “good” scene or not, changing it into the question of whether one is writing a *workable* scene or not. Is the conflict clear? Do we care about it? Are the characters beginning to emerge with their own sensibilities and voices? Have the characters been flattened or stereotyped, or their special backgrounds distorted? If so, does the distortion make its point convincingly by emphases, or is it necessary to probe the character further? In the teeth of all

this, the student is urged to ask (as does any writer, frequently) whether or not there is something there worth re-writing. In discussing the possibilities with a critical audience of fellow writers, trying new possibilities and presenting re-writes to that audience, the writer has the opportunity to use that risk to sharpen his or her effectiveness inside the skin of the characters.

The risk of writing then becomes the risk of understanding, of daring to get close in the midst of conflict, protected only thinly by the virtual reality of theatre. Dramatic experience is a simulacrum, a test of life, a risk of vitality. It presents images and representations that often condense and exaggerate life beyond any literal understanding of what is real or true. Since dramatic experience requires a community to justify it, to endorse it, and to desire it, it can persist ONLY if it accommodates difference. It can persist as meaningful and enduring only if its action incorporates difference in non-trivial, substantial ways.

Now translate this into the realm of working in the civic arena for social justice. How do we get it right? Don't we need a plan of action, a scenario? Don't we need an approach to those we know will oppose us, and the resources to respond to opposition from unanticipated parties putting forward unexpected arguments? How do we get both the sense of direction and action, and the flexibility of response necessary to hang in there in the civic arena and hash out action that improves situations or increases awareness of conditions and developments we find inequitable or unjust or even predatory? How do we engineer the prevalence of one set of values over another without permanently alienating or repressing the opposition? Training as a dramatic writer, a playwright, framed as I have described it here, is the most direct training I know for this work. By describing other elements of that training that are needed to complete the picture, I hope to persuade you of the value of this unusual, critically interactive mode of interdisciplinary training in the creative arts, and to suggest an alternative possibility for rearing young people who are skilled at the open give-and-take of a messy, slow-acting, diverse, truly democratic polity.

Writing to Make it Tough—Maximizing the Conflict

Can you talk to people who disagree with you? Do you seek that out? Is it one of your favorite activities to find a way to talk about a subject that you know will produce disagreement, if not hostility, from the person you wish to speak with? A playwright engages in this activity frequently, having not only to respond to the other side of the question as it is argued by someone else, but to find, create, and ensoul the *person* who would make those arguments. Taking this one step further, he or she could create the one person who is the perfect antagonist, who comes from a different background, who *feels very differently* about the problem and circumstances at stake in the conflict, and who can meet apparently unanswerable arguments with equally unassailable arguments of her or his own. It is clearly an advantage in a real-life exchange if you have had the experience of imagining yourself into the skin of your opponent. The playwright is also responsible for finding the setting in which this fruitful conflict can plausibly take place. The playwright is thus the mater environmentalist, with the power to envision the social structure that might emerge into sustainability.

Writing to Make a Scene—Envisioning a Whole Action

The playwright or screenwriter must find a way to conclude most scenes, to produce out of the action winners and losers. Doing this teaches the writer (and the audience) how to win and how to lose. It teaches the writer to see events as shaped and sensitizes her to what is required to reach the ending she seeks. In other fields, seeing large actions like this, and understanding how, and in what order, they must unfold, is called strategic thinking.

Writing to Shape an Outcome—Creating a World of Possibility

Are there outcomes no one has imagined yet? Are the cynics proclaiming that we are not going to find the actions that lead to those outcomes, that it does not matter what we do, because we will end up in the same conflicted mess we started with, except that now it will be worse? Is it tempting to believe, to borrow a French saying, that the more the world changes, the more it stays the same? If so that is the equivalent of saying that the scenario will always have a boilerplate plot, not an original one. If it is true that “the significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them,” (attributed to Albert Einstein), then political stasis and conventional thinking are not likely settings for creating solutions. Since dramatic writers create not only scenes of conflict, but scenes that are a part of what theatre people call a “setting,” a large context, an environment, dramatists must create the setting, too. In this way, drama gives us the tools to imagine the future contextually and to play it out, to think through alternative scenarios to the end,

and to find out what the pitfalls might be. These tools are in the hands of scenarists of all kinds, including the playwrights and screenwriters who are our most likely visionaries, our new master builders. Susanne Langer (1953) spoke of drama as *virtual history*, and indeed, with the same logic, it can be seen as the *virtual future*, whether it looks backwards—the usual direction of history—or forwards.

Writing to Forge an Idea or an Ambition—Imagining a Polity of Creative Conflict

In his *D-major Variations for Piano, Op. 76*, Ludwig van Beethoven (1809) performs a kind of miracle. At first he patiently works through lots of common ways of playing with the initial theme, performing modest variations within the traditional, comfortable, confines of the conventional forms explicit and implicit in his chosen theme. Each variation is polite, expected, almost obligatory. Slowly the variations become more serious, more daring, more insistent, developing momentum and excitement. Suddenly, out of this ferment, there bubbles a brand new melody, still smacking somehow of its origins, but utterly amazing in its eruption of new beauty. It is transfixing, a golden moment. Seldom do composing artists let us see their process so transparently, so patiently, and yet, even in this case, what emerges is a transcendent mystery, a triumph of the musical imagination, a synthesis of patient exploration and the volcanic eruption of new mountains from old rock.

If a dramatist begins with a simple conflict and builds this patiently to the hard issues facing a community, then there is an opportunity for the eruption of the political imagination through the eruption of the dramatic one, finding a way that conflict, the sticky, slow flow of old institutions in trouble, after a period of tried-and-true variations in the conservative mode, can break up, re-form, and emerge as something both new and newly workable.

Using a strategy of this kind, what I am arguing for here is that the natural connection between the dramatic and the political, the questions of polity, identity, community, and justice, can be exploited by turning it into an educational scenario, what we usually call a curriculum. To increase the odds of that happening, I have a proposal for an academy that offers a form of training that, like Beethoven's variations, reveals the new, refulgent, insouciant, and beautiful emerging out of the old, like a flower from a stem.

I propose to establish an academy that trains politicians with the same rigor that a ballet school uses to train professional dancers. What is the equivalent of a *plié* for politicians? What do we need to know and practice to understand how give and take works in the political arena, mixing it up with a wide variety of people from various backgrounds, cultures, persuasions and expectations? What do we need to know to cultivate the capacity for vision, for crafting a scenario that will produce constructive results? What observational, analytical, synthetic and creative *muscles* need to be lengthened and strengthened to make possible the sustained intellectual inventiveness, vision and grace it takes to craft majorities on complex issues and become a really effective legislator? It seems to me that whatever this academy might look like, the dramatic arts, and particularly dramatic writing, are key elements. The dramatist, by nature, deals with revealing the unseen, discovering the structures of events that yield a certain result. The history of dramatic form strongly suggests that these structures, as if genetically, by ancient and ineluctable disposition, unfold to a community the dimensions of and prospects for justice in the events that play out in front of us.

The next steps in the design of this academy should be done experimentally by a group of teachers who are integrative arts educators with backgrounds in history, philosophy and politics. Plato may have been wrong, in this view, about the desirability of being governed by a philosopher-king, but he was right about the academy. At last we may get to unravel what *know thyself* might mean in a social context that promotes life in the peaceful conflict of the political arena. This would be a social context marked by an aggressive effort to make the drama we live, working out the complex ecology of a sustainable set of cultures thriving in a democratic setting. In some evolutionary translation of the exhilarating triumph we experience in killing our enemies, we could learn to triumph in the exhilaration of maintaining our balance in a never-ending high-wire act. Our long pole, held lightly and magnifying our dexterous adjustments at its ends, is the dramatic capacity to create, and keep creating, a sustainable world.

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