



Your Name Here:
An Actor's Guide To Developing
Your Own Solo Play

by Susan Merson

FORWARD

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This book is about telling a story. The story can be yours. It can be someone else's. But, the book is about telling a story in the most concentrated fashion that you may have ever attempted. The effort will not be casual. The audacity needed is mighty.

You will ask an audience to sit in a room and listen to you talk in a concentrated way. You may even ask them to pay money to do so. Your proud parents will not be next to you grinning and affirming your cleverness. You will be on your own, lost in your own ether. There is nothing like it. You will be the "happy genius of your own household", as William Carlos Williams once said, and you will invite us in with your skill, passion and deep intention.

In these chapters, I have laid out six different ways of creating a solo play. I include exercises for you to help define your work. I ask you to think long and hard about the undertaking. At the end of the book you will have an overview of one person's technique of creating solo pieces for the stage. There will be observations on acting style, writing choices and producing tips.

I have organized the book chronologically. I begin with the first piece I created and move through time with you, allowing you to see how time itself mellowed both my subject matter and the way in which the pieces came together. This is not primarily a reference book. It is a storybook. The book will tell you the story of a storyteller creating people and places for audiences. My work and observations change with the years. I think the progression from one stage to the next is as instructive as finding the exact page where I address the interpretation of multiple characters in various voices.

Of all the different kinds of performing I have done, solo performing allows me to be at my most relaxed and most unique. Franz Kafka said, "All art is a form of prayer". And so it is especially with solo performing. The solo performer is quiet within and open to the energy that flows through her. Her movements and choices are streams of clear thought.

Solo performance is meditation at its highest. When everything works, the Performer disappears, and the heightened Storyteller appears.

It's really fun. It's really hard. Worth every moment.
Be humble.

INTRODUCTION

“Passion is the very fact of God in Man”--Paddy Chayefsky

PASSIONATE CONNECTION

I have a passion for the theatre. I love the simple exchange of people sitting in a room together and breathing the same air and experiencing the same story as it enters and transforms the space between them. I have learned more in small black box theatres in crummy neighborhoods, onstage and off, than in the fancy show palaces uptown. The uptown spots thrill and overwhelm me, but the small space, where the actor must be still and simple to let the tale emerge, is the place where the real magic happens for me.

I love language. I love ritual. I love danger. I love the drive toward survival. I even love that for most people in this country the “theatre” doesn’t exist. There is a dinosaur element to this ancient craft that many in this high tech, cyber world can connect with no longer. It’s like an unknown river of fiery lava that flows beneath the cement and freeways of our consciousness these days. In most places in America, it’s a secret. There are weary practitioners who barely earn a living but still they return, revitalized by the truth of it. There is a primal call and though it’s a call many do not understand, I have come to terms with the fact that there is value in being a person of the theatre. To me, a person in the theatre must be a person with a passionate voice; ready to speak the truth in every piece of work they create.

In my years of teaching, performing, writing and producing I have noted a real change. Coming of age in the emotive, sexy and overblown 1960’s, I was surrounded with people who couldn’t wait to spill their heart, toot their own horns and preach their political doctrine. We were all about encounter groups and “happenings” and Esalen sensitivity training and “group grope” sessions in theatre school. Mind and body were assailed with gusts of wind from ridiculously open doorways. Much good came from this time. Some damage, too. But the essential nature of this time was one of experimentation and claiming the right to a voice. Feminism, --good! Racism—bad! Free love-good! Military-industrial complex—bad. It was a time of “my country right or wrong” for some and “my own thing- right or wrong” for others.

Then the Viet Nam War was over. And cynicism borne of defeat and then Watergate and greed borne of Reaganism swept the country and young people learned to shut up and down and don a three-piece suit. And then, AIDS hit and not only were doors shut tight, but legs were crossed once again, breasts were buttoned behind punk armor and necks that once sported love beads now sported dog collars.

I remember teaching a workshop in the early 1990’s where a young woman wrote a play about relationship and her heroes never touched, never alluded to sexuality and never even quivered. Her version of love was whining on a black telephone for 45 minutes to a closeted gay boy who shaved his legs as he talked to her. Here lies passion, said she. The vicarious thought of being together and shedding skin—quite literally—to come closer.

Interesting, I thought. But what of poetry? What of passion? What of connection? I suppose the play was illustrative of all three by the lack of all three but it was troubling to me as an educator and playwright. How could this talented young woman speak of what held her hostage? How could she write about why she never removed her glasses or leather vest or never hazarded a connection on any level with a real person until after she received a clean AIDS test certificate and at least three clearances from a dating service. Her case was extreme perhaps but I have long pondered the difference between constipation and style and now am willing to state that what passed for style in this young artist was truly a constipation of the spirit.

Shakespeare might say, “A rose by any other name might smell as sweet”. I might look at the symbolic rather than the actual in this young person's run at relationship in the new millennium. But I pause.

I want to put in a vote for old fashioned passionate commitment, connection and the guts to take a stand emotionally, artistically and even politically, if the reader acknowledges the connection between all three states of being. This is exactly what a solo performer does.

Solo performers connect with their passion and have the guts to take the full responsibility of telling their story to the world. They are the generative artists. Of course, one can be an artist with an independent and defined voice, even as an interpretative artist.

INTERPRETATIVE VS. GENERATIVE ARTIST

But what is the difference between an interpretative and generative artist? Let's talk about being the megaphone rather than the voice that comes through it. That is, being an interpretative artist rather than a generative one. The interpretative artist is one that takes an existing idea and expresses it through the medium of his/her own consciousness, physicality and experience. This is an art in itself. Each actor comes to a role with different experience. Therefore, each actor portrays a role differently. But, an actor who speaks someone else's words exclusively remains a tool of the writer, delivering someone else's message.

Most actor training focuses on simplifying and clearing out thought, action and deed so that one can accept and become “part of” the character being portrayed. Interpretative artists, like actors, do have a voice through the openness of the body or the “actor's instrument.” The actor becomes the structure within which the voice of the writer and the vision of the director resonate. They have a voice by virtue of the kind of work they choose to perform. Every choice has its reasons and every reason adds up to an actor's statement. The interpretative artist is the messenger. The interpretative artist speaks elegantly, but speaks others words.

Now let us come to the generative artist. She is the one who starts from scratch and delivers her own voice into the world. She does the alchemy, spins the gold and delivers it to marketplace.

MAKING THE COMMITMENT

As a young artist, still a teenager, I remember coming across this quote by Andre Gide, which stopped me, cold. I paraphrase it here:

“Look for your own,” Gide said. “Do not do what someone else can do as well as you. Do not say, do not feel, and do not think what someone else can say, feel or think as well as you. Look for your own. And out of yourself create. You are the most irreplaceable of beings.”

The idea that each one of us has something unique, some cellular peculiarity that is important for the balance of the universe, give us each a special position, a “saved space” for whatever it is we are going to bring into the world. Indeed, it lays our obligations clearly before us. We each have something to give and the job is to find it, hone it and toss it into the soup. To paraphrase Delmore Schwartz: “our dreams create responsibility.”

SPEAKING THE TRUTH, CREATING THE WORLD

As a teenager, I remember picking up *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I had already played Anne a few times as young girl but when I started to read the diary this second time, as a committed young artist, I learned something new. It wasn't that Anne's observations of the world were so extraordinary. All young girls felt those things. No. It was that they were so deeply true. True to her character, her time and her situation, despite the madness and tragedy that surrounded her. Her truth, which included not only the insights but the resonance from the world from which she spoke to us, gave us a larger sense of truth.

“I still believe that people are really good at heart,” says 16-year-old Anne. She speaks these words of innocence from a hidden garret while the world is turning upside down. Now her truth is greater than her insight. Now we know who she is. A young girl, fierce with innocence. And we are moved that her truth remains so steadfast and piercing as we read not only her words but also her world. She has spoken in a way that no one else could have. She becomes Gide's “most irreplaceable of beings.”

That is exactly what the successful solo artist does. She speaks the truth from her heart against the backdrop of a clear and present World.

So, I read Anne Frank's words and her world at the same time. And everything she said resonated differently because I understood her emotion and realized that it was made more brilliant and polished by the world from which it emerged. The world itself was the antagonist of her story. The world gave her story conflict and that conflict is what honed

the detail and pierced the veil of mediocrity. Her small observations became profound because her words reverberated showing us what was underneath and all around them.

Anne Frank taught me to speak the truth, from my world, as an artist. She taught me that the universal was in the specific. She did not describe my world. She described hers and the light with which she illuminated her experience shot right through time and space and spoke to me in my world at my time. How could this be so?

It is so because the artist slows us right down. Our everyday lives move quickly. They zap from encounter to encounter, image to undigested image, and exchange to spontaneous exchange. But what does the artist do for us? The artist isolates, polishes and shines the detail that refracts light into our own experience.

When Anne speaks of her love for Peter, she speaks of all our first lovers. When she strives to keep her faith in the world, we recognize our own basic optimism borne of conscience and our own struggle to believe, so we can go on living.

As solo artists, we have our own true voice and the world from which we speak. These two elements are in sharp contrast to each other and they are what create the dynamic of a dramatic solo play. How the Storyteller emerges from and fights with the elements of her World determines the pitch of conflict, the level of inherent debate in the play. The higher the level of debate, the higher the conflict, and the hotter the heat—the more drama is created.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

What do you know, feel or think that no one else does? OK. A tough one to start with but give it a try.

What is the quiet voice inside of you that needs to be heard?

How do you process the world on your own terms? What is your digestive mechanism? What lenses shape your view?

How do you define your world—the one from which you are writing?

What are your own terms?

The rhythm of your language?

The things you observe?

The world you come from?

What makes your story come from you?

Why do you need to tell it and why do we need to hear it?