

WRITING EMPATHETICALLY THROUGH FREE ASSOCIATION AND SENSE MEMORY

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PROLOGUE AND CONTEXT

I am a playwright/actor/teacher and arts based researcher. This is an in-process reflection of work I have been doing with my creative writing, acting and my teaching of drama and dramatic writing. I have been exploring a few concepts that have been part of my practical understanding as a professional theatre artist for many years. When I work in my tradition of text based theatre, I am in effect in silent conversation with the legacy of artists who have come before me.

My new play is based upon the creative dynamics on John Huston`s biographical film Freud (1962). The writing process, and my background reading on psychoanalysis and its start as the talking cure, has led me to make certain connections in my artistic and teaching practice.

Empathy

I see that my practice of the art of the theatre, inclusive of drama in educational settings, engages personal empathy. The work as outlined here demonstrates the background means of that engagement

Freudian based Free Association

Free Association may still be considered somewhat controversial. The participant speaks aloud freely whatever words and images come to mind.

Stanislavski`s concept of Sense Memory and the actor`s Inner Monologue

Sense Memory is an actor`s technique for making more physically real the psychological truth of the character`s experience by using the actors own sensual memories of experiences. To explore character and the given circumstances of the play, the actor may improvise a steady stream speak aloud of the inner monologue life of the character.

Words into Dramatic Monologues

These techniques are used as interpretative tools. Given that they are word based, I have applied them as creative approaches for writing dramatic monologues or stories, including work with in-service teachers.

Authentic Witness

As a supportive alternative to the writer working strictly alone in the early writing, I adapted the concept of the authentic witness, which I discuss in a later section.

FREE ASSOCIATION AND SENSE MEMORY



- Much of our experience of the world is through our body and the five senses
- Self-guided free association helps the writer to focus on the visceral nature of experiences
- For example, one specific memory of a scent may help make more vivid the flow of phrases and images
- When the flow starts to slow or runs dry or begins to repeat, we bring ourselves back to talking from our physical position in the present moment.
- Ask how is my body physically feeling; what words might I use to describe what my senses are telling me; and then begin the association again

GUIDED FREE ASSOCIATION WRITING

- The writer sits in a comfortably alert and neutral position
- The writer meditates on her breathing, repeating in a quiet voice, “Breathing in and breathing out...”
- The writer then starts to freely say some images and phrases
- Once that talk is freely flowing, the writer may choose to guide the images through a chosen memory



Authentic Witness

- The authentic witness is a concept adapted from contact improvisational dance and dance therapy for dramatic writing
- People have an inherent need to be recognized, to be seen
- Authentic means to be present as a witness for the writer

Authentic Witness as Scribe

- In dance the witness may describe what was shared freely in movement form after it is complete. In the context of creative writing, the witness is also a scribe.

- For writing, the authentic witness sits in a chair opposite the writer.

- The authentic witness will supportively watch and listen to the writer

- Once this is practiced, the witness will scribe every phrase and image spoken from the writer

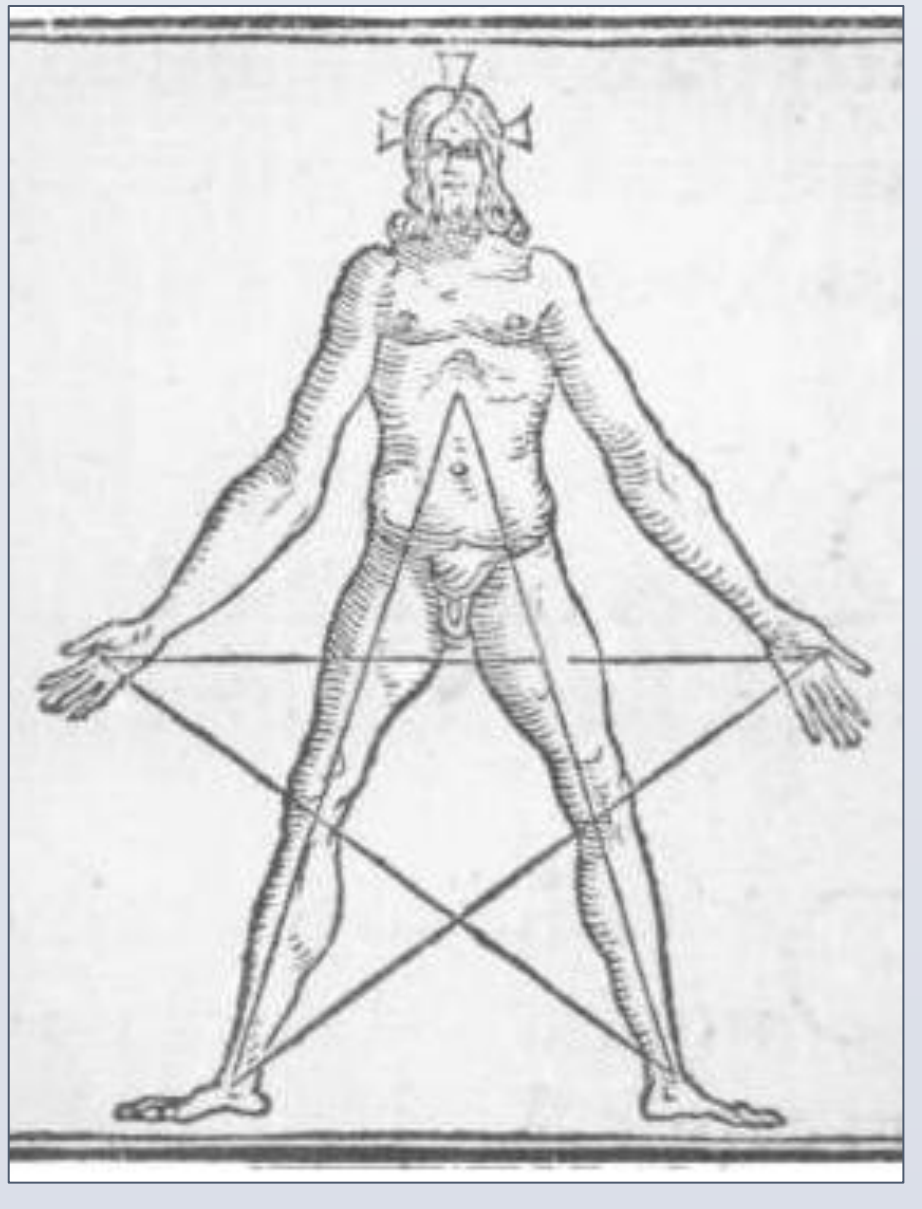


Inner Monologue

- The writer will take the notes and choose to create an order
- The free association is then further guided by the writer
- The order may be in the form of the inner thoughts of a character
- The character is informed by the sense memory the writer is choosing to focus on

Options for the Writer

- The Inner Monologue may become a story from the character
- Shared directly with the audience, as performance
- The writer may also choose to turn the work into a story
- The writing begins with the sense memory as expressed with words that arise from the lived experience of the writer`s body.



Empathetic Awareness through this Technique

- Various research shows a greater personal empathy leads to more effective learning.
- In theatre and drama one is asked to experience new people and new ideas through the “magic if”
- As in role play, WHAT IF I am a new mother; a young student struggling to read; or, someone faced with a dilemma that is outside my range of personal experience—how would I respond?
- Teachers may use Sense Memory Association as a way of seeing their teaching from a particular student`s point-of view.
- Writing an inner monologue from the point-of-view of a student whose *trajectory* the teacher has altered in some way.

Excerpt of Empathetic Monologue

The following excerpt is from an in-service teacher who was a student in my drama education class. It is used with permission of the author.

R.B.: “Well, what is it this time. Just leave me alone! What do you want from me? I didn’t do anything! Here it comes. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah...Are you done yet? Can I go now? See ya later! Wouldn’t want to be ya!

I feel like I do the wrong thing all the time. Do you guys even trust me? For once I would like it if they told me I did a great job at something like helping out a friend in class. I wonder if they even notice these things.

I am trying my best. Just give me a chance to prove myself. Sometimes, I can’t help myself from doing these things. I do feel bad afterwards. I am trying. It’s just so hard sometimes. I try to fit in with my friends but they just don’t seem to understand me...No one seems to understand me except for my mom. I miss my mom. I wish she was here with me. I feel so alone sometimes....”

QUESTIONS for APPLICATION/DISCUSSION

- What drama strategies might be used to prepare and extend to use this work?
 - ❖ Mirror Games including Boal’s, Word Tennis, Sensory Walk, Soundscape, Hotseating in varied forms
- What new understanding might be found for teachers of their student’s learning by consciously engaging empathy through dramatic writing?
- How might the tools of drama and theatre acting craft be applied to the process of creative writing?
- How would this work be adapted for direct use by students in the K to 12 setting?



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If you have comments for this work, please contact me as above.