

Eric Beatty – 5/25/03

Eric:

Ok, good morning. Happy Sunday. Thank you for coming. I know, for me it was nice to have a day off yesterday so I could come to the second week with more energy. Annie looks much much older today.

Annie:

What, do I have wrinkles or something?

Eric:

She must be 24.

The other day I talked about inspiration for movement. I want to talk a little bit and play a little bit about inspiration for writing. I also want to talk about creating theater as an ensemble. Not just the playwright sitting by herself or himself and bringing it to the actors, but creating something as a group, directors, writers, actors, designers.

Written on Board:

Who

What

Where

When

Why

We will go around the room and create a mini-scenario. I will say Who it is, Willy will say what is happening, Ray will say where it is happening, Annie will say when it is happening and Liz will create the Why. The subtext.

Willy:

A thirty-year-old politician and a five year old girl. That's the who. What are they doing. Both are walking down Florida Avenue. They stop and look at a sign for Gallaudet University.

Eric:

You sort of stole Ray's "Where." This sort of makes me realize I should have the where first. So, when Ray?

Ray:

At sunset.

Annie:

They are hurrying...running out of time.

Liz:

They are late to a meeting on top of the hill.

Eric :

A new who.

Shira:

A woman.

Eric:

On the beach.

Willy:

At midnight, New Years Eve.

Ray:

Opening a bottle of champagne.

Annie:

Celebrating.

Eric:

How does she feel?

Annie:

Happy, it is the New Year.

Eric:

Why?

Annie:

It has been a good year, had some frustrations, now she is starting a new year and throwing that all behind them.

Eric.

A new who.

Liz:

A thirteen year old teenage boy.

Shira:

In the boys bathroom in junior high school.

Eric:

Right before a very important test.

Willy:

Smoking a small joint of marijuana.

Ray:

He is nervous, trying to chill out...relax.

Annie:

Henry VIII confronting Anne Boleyn.

Liz:

In a castle in England.

Shira:

At the noon matinee. They are in the movie.

Eric:

They jump off the screen.

Willy:

New Woody Allen movie.

Eric:

Purple Rose of Cairo. (laughing) Saw the video for Jerry Seinfeld's film, *Comedian*, about the process of him trying to go back to stand up comedy. Interesting about how they create their work. I recommend you see it if you can.

So, we have just created three scenarios as group process. It wasn't just the playwright going home by themselves and creating something. It was a group scenario.

One exercise is choosing a word, and then as an improvisation you can create a story related to improv from that word.

Say I choose castle. Or indigestion. Immediately you have a scenario in your head. So even one word can be the inspiration for a play, or even a one-minute scene. Of course, you can also use a prop. If I bring in a saxophone and hand it to you and say, "Go away and write me a scene," and the only source for your scene is that saxophone, or a lollipop. Now, one playwright and may write a whole film noir detective mystery about a lollipop and someone else may write a play for children about a lollipop that, when you lick it, you can ride on a dragon and fly through the sky. One thing that I used when we created work at touchstone theatre, I brought in a painting. Edward Hopper, the night café. It is a painting of a diner late at night and there is the woman who is the server and there are two men at the counter. I think one is reading the newspaper, and you see the light of the street lamp coming into the café. So I brought in the picture to the ensemble, actually you know I didn't bring in the picture. I'm trying to remember, this was five...no, ten years ago.

I chose some elements from the picture. A raincoat, a newspaper, a plate of bacon and eggs, and streetlight. I gave that list of elements to the ensemble and I said come back in fifteen minutes with a scene. I think I gave it to two groups of actors and they each came

back with their own scene on their feet to present and they had to have each of those elements in the scene. So maybe the scene had nothing to do with the scene, but it was the source. There are many sources...you can use a newspaper story, a political or social idea, a costume. I know I want to write a scene about a red dress. That scene could be very different. It could be one kind of red dress or another kind of red dress.

Why don't we have Willy and Ray work together and Annie and Shira work together. This is just for the two of you. Person A, one person, hands something to person B, but you don't make a big deal about showing exactly what it is. Don't worry about that, just hand something to them. This exercise is called the gift...you're giving a gift to the other person. The other person says thank you for the gift. Then you describe what the gift is to the person you gave it to. The process of someone giving you something. You're thanking the person and then describing what they gave you.

Example:

Person A: "Here, I want you to have this"

Person B: "Why thank you, it is beautiful."

Try to force yourself to keep describing it. Even if you run out of ideas, talk some gibberish, then more ideas will come. And, for the sake of the exercise, have the person who gives say nothing.

(Above described exercise occurs)

Eric (continued):

Ok. Any thoughts or reactions to the exercise.

Annie:

I liked that it simulates your mind. You have to keep going, a simple think I had to keep talking about.

Ray:

I felt a little awkward. I don't know him well at all.

Eric:

But the power of the exercise is it doesn't matter what he gives you, you can create your own gift. Was it awkward because you didn't want to share yourself?

Willy:

I know this exercise...trying to create my own gift. Thinking of all the color, texture, size, as a writer.

Eric:

I think often, the most wonderful discoveries are when you get to the point that you don't know what you were going to say next or write next, then you have that breakthrough.

You're already in the middle of things you think of something you hadn't thought of before.

Also, when we do this exercise, I think about what is our relationship. Are we old friends, is this my son. So I'm sort of coming up with my own scenario.

Shira:

Me...I noticed I was doing a lot of emotional relationship to the gift rather than describing the physical gift.

Eric:

And that is totally valid.

Willy:

Make complexity possible. He gave me a 22 rifle. I don't use rifles, but it was pretty, its nice, it's silver. I thought, "Why would he give me a gun?"

Eric:

Or why would you choose that he gave you a gun.

Willy:

Really, it just came from the shape he gave me...the jumping off point.

Eric:

And that is wonderful that you didn't edit yourself. In the beginning of the process, it is important not to edit yourself. I know as a writer, I start to write something and then I say to myself, no no no, not good. No...write it down. Maybe you come back to it two weeks later, two years later and your idea.

Annie:

I have a comment. One of my writing instructors always said that the morning I s the best time to write because your brain isn't working yet.

Ray:

Takes me a while to find the rhythm when I write.

Eric:

And about rhythm...certainly music is a huge source of inspiration for writing. To listen to, feel, or watch the music and then be able to write.

Let me try one more exercise. It is a little more risky...you have to be able to accept it. It's nothing too much. Work with each other again.

Ray, you can show Willy your hand. Annie, you can show Shira your hand. Willy and Shira...you just look at their hand...the lines, the textures, the color. Inspired by their

hand, I want you to create a story. The story doesn't have to be related to the hand...it can be a ghost, or McDonalds, or a base ball game, but it has to be inspired by their hand. If you start to get lost in the story, go back to the hand at let it lead you.

Ray:

So it is like reading the hand?

Eric:

You're not trying to read the future. Just trying to create the story. You're telling the story to the other person. It doesn't have to do with their hand literally...it is just inspired by their hand.

(Hand Exercise Occurs)

Annie:

I'm curious. Was your story related to nature? Both of our stories were related to nature. Humans as part of nature.

Ray:

Mine was more of an analysis. His life, what stories, the way his hand is beautiful. Tough years, strong foundation.

Eric:

I haven't done this very often. I got both of these exercises from a storytelling workshop. From Jay O'Callahan...thank you to him for the exercises. I think with the hand it is often nature. I see canyons and rivers and mountains. Sometimes it also goes to fantasy, like dragons or fairy tales or mountains.

Willy:

He was in one of my classes here.

Eric:

Well he tours quite a lot. He performs at the national story telling festival in Tennessee a lot. He was in *Touchstone*. He has come to DC for storytelling too. Wonderful person.

I want to talk a little bit about creating original ensemble theatre. It think it is important to understand that a lot of theatre companies in America use this process. Certainly not all the time, but for some of productions. I was talking to Tim and Willy about the network of ensemble theatres. It includes some of the theatres on this list that I want to pass out here.

So my connection with this started with my interest in mime and pantomime. When you create mime scenarios, it is a process you create together. The woman is actually Margaret Edson who wrote *Wit*, which won the Pulitzer Prize. She and I lost touch with each other, then I saw that someone named Margaret Edson wrote something called *Wit*, and wondered if that was the Margaret Edson I did mime with in high school.

Also, working with Mummenschanz, the mime company, we did a lot of collaboration about how to do a certain movement or interaction with two characters. Then, primarily with *Touchstone Theatre*, I worked there for six years. So, when I wanted to get my MFA, part of my final project was I taught a class for undergraduates about how to create different ensemble theatre pieces. So we explored different ways to go about it. This is the general road map.

1. Choice source of inspiration.
2. Research
3. Development of
 - a. text,
 - b. movement
 - c. character
 - d. design elements
 - i. lights
 - ii. sound
 - iii. set/props
4. Editing – Who does?
5. “Directing”
6. Performance/Audience & Ensemble Feedback

There are a lot of different ways to go about creating an original play with an ensemble. For me, the term original means it is a script that hasn't existed before. Maybe it is an adaptation of a story, or a newspaper article, or maybe its an adaptation of a painting. I think Martha Clark has done some work based on the paintings of Bosch. And that has been on Broadway. So she has taken an artist as her source. Taken a work of theatre from an artist. For one of my pieces with the students at Towson, I chose Georgia O'Keefe as the source. So for our research, #2 (above), I had the students bring in paintings or objects that might relate to the painting. Somebody brought fans, and feathers. Someone brought in a cow's skull head. That was the research phase...bringing things in...primarily through improvisation, or text exercises. We would go to #3, develop the text, movement, characters, and begin to play with the design. Obviously, in an ensemble, each person has his or her area of expertise. Naturally, that person would tend to work more with the design elements, but I think it is also interesting to have that person be on stage in the performance and have someone who is more interested in writing, also be on stage or play with the lights.

One of the most successful company's is Theatre de la June Leune in Minnesota and they are quite successful.

Annie:

Are they in Minneapolis?

Eric:

Yes. The second group, *Blue Man Group*, they are now touring around the company. In general, these theatres tend to be very much rooted in their community...where they live. They try to live there, have long term jobs. It's not just someone coming in for one show and going back to where they live. These are people who have worked together for 10 – 15 years.

So, a very interesting point in the process is number four. Who does the editing? Is it done by one person who has the power to choose what to use. Is this a group discussion? Is this a committee of two or three people? Even once you've chosen, you then have to decide on an order. When we would create original pieces at touchstone, we'd have big pieces of paper on the wall describing different sections. We'd try to run two or three sections together and see how that feels.

You as playwrights might sound like a lot of work, all this discussion...who needs that. It is certainly valid to have the playwright sit on his/her own and create the play. The exciting part of this process, everyone feels ownership in the final production. Everyone has brought ideas...has had something to say about different elements. Obviously, at some point you have to make choices. You keep some things and leave some things to the side. But that is with any process.

Ray:

This week I realized I like to really think about things for days in my head before I write. Other writers might write impulsively. It is really interesting to see the differences.

Eric:

My question for you...have you learned anything from the actors, or your expert, or from anyone else that you wouldn't have thought of by yourself.

Ray:

Especially yesterday when we walked through a scene and put things together I could see what was not working. The elements for the characters, the TTY thing and what not, that time period...the question being how far do we stretch the comical farce. So working with the ensemble helps me decide in the process between reality and farce.

Eric:

One other part I want to quickly talk about, obviously the performance. Even the directing you have to decide who does that too. One drawback of the product is the shape of the whole play sometimes takes longer to find and have it be nice, because there are so many people involved. Sometimes the last week before you open and the first week of the show can be a little messy. Once you've played it for a week or two weeks and you keep adjusting...once you find it, then the ensemble together really grows with it and feels invested in it. So it is challenging when you get to the process of who edits and who directs. The other part I want to make sure you understand is it is very important that you have the feedback from the audience and ensemble. The whole communication of how things are going is important. If you can set it up with a week or two weeks of preview and you invite the audience to participate in a structured feedback session. You have to

ask specific questions that you want to have input on. The feedback is also important to help you grow. It is a challenging process, but I think it often results in a more dynamic and a more unified production. I'd be interested to hear what Willy says about our thing that we worked on at Towson. That was a type of ensemble process, but Willy already had a script that was quite developed. But Willy was very open to me and the other person bringing our ideas. I think we understood that he had the power to decide at the end.

Willy:

Originally, I was writing a one man show and my director gave me the idea of adding a stage manager type character. The basic story is you have a deaf guy in a museum tour about deaf culture. So I have technical things to show the audience, so the stage manager helps run them.

Eric:

That's about what I had prepared so we can have questions, discussion or break. I think any time you have a group of actors who are willing to play with your words it's great.

Everything you do is a choice. We, in the audience, enjoy your choices. Is it a steel chair or a wooden chair? To me, as an audience member, that means different things. I enjoy trying to figure out why a group makes different choices on stage.

Tim:

I think that is a good starting point...the empty space on stage.

Eric:

But it can also be from emotion. We worked with a company from Chile. We did a bilingual production based on the Myth of Daedalus. There was some English, Spanish and a mixture. At one point the director had the women doing some hand motions...the director just wanted the emotional experience in the mystery of their hand-signs.

Of course the first choice 3 you make might not be the choice you finish with, but it might lead you to another choice. But it is ok to experiment and try different things.

Willy:

When you worked with *Touchstone*, I heard it was based in Bethlehem. How much did your work involve issues in the community?

Eric:

That's a good question. We did scripts too. I think about once a year or every two years, we had a script that dealt with more local issues or something the community could relate to on a local level. They did a play rather recently about the closing of the Bethlehem steel mill. People were fired...families that had worked there for three or four generations were laid off. They used the steel mill to perform and used some of the former workers in a chorus.

Tim:

You bring up a good point about interviewing and using that as a point of research. Use this approach.

Annie:

Like *The Laramie Project*.

Eric:

And also sight specific work that you perform at a very specific location.

Tim:

Some of *Cornerstone Theatre's* early work used to go around, stay in a community for several months and then create a show in the community. I think Cornerstone Theatre, every Man in the Mall, CJ Jones a deaf actor, was in that. I think they did it in a mall, but I'm not sure.

Eric:

Do you two envision writing for the rest of your lives and trying to get your stuff produced?

Ray:

I have a family to support. Would like to set up a TV production company related to deaf issues. Sometimes I'm faced with envisioning a play and trying not to limit myself. Sometimes I work at the community theatre level, so I haven't really envisioned working on a national level.

Tim:

I think that is an interesting point too. Are you writing for a particular place or specific people?

Eric:

And I don't know a lot about Deaf theatre, I know there is NTD. One thing I like about Annie's play, is she wants it to be accessible to deaf and hearing audiences.

Ray:

It talks about history, poetry, and deaf related stuff, which are fascinating to deaf audiences, but I think it would be interesting to hearing audiences as well.

Eric:

One of the things we face, as you brought up, is how to have a family and a decent life and be an artist. One of the interesting things about community based ensemble work is they have support in the community. People know them...they know that is their job. They've made a commitment to the community, so they don't always have to be looking for the next job. I think it is very important to have groups of theatre where people can have a fairly secure job. They don't always have to be auditioning and sending their script to one hundred people. So ensembles, that is an element of what they are doing. It

is important to have a life outside their work. You are just as important in the community as the beggar, the car salesman or anyone else. Maybe, out of this retreat, you can go home and create your own ensemble of actors to work with you. I think the most important thing to do is “just do it.” Get a place to rehearse, create the play, and get people to come see it.

(END OF SESSION)