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WOMEN AND DRAMA: TRANSFORMING THE DOUBLE REFRACTION OF THE FICTIONAL AND THE FICTIONAL REAL

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Abstract

This article looks at drama as a means for women to reflect on the construction of identity and considers how parameters for exploring meaning can be developed within the drama.

Consideration is given to the historical silencing and marginalisation of women in language, discourse, society and culture. Drama, with its emphasis on embodiment provides an appropriate space (locus) for women to become their own representers, agents and subjects. It is through the drama that women can uncover, mark and affirm silenced aspects of themselves. Women's bodies carry cultural significance and loading as both flesh and blood identity and symbolic construct. Within the tradition of Western philosophy we are perceived through a gender lens and the generic 'he' is used to represent all subjects. The female subjects represented by the generic 'he' have traditionally had no influence in setting the terms of reference but are required to act and react according to the masculine ideal. This is known as a false construct.

To move beyond this construct and disrupt the status quo requires strength, courage and resilience. By engaging in drama, in which there are both elements of the real context, the fictionalised real and fictional context, false constructs can be challenged and disrupted in safety. Through drama praxis perceptual shifts occur as the false construct is recognised and challenged thereby creating the possibility for a re-alignment and re-cognition of the real. It is the possibility of the immediacy of perceptual shifts which gives such vitality and validity to the drama process.

Biography

Beryl Chalk is a doctoral candidate at the University of Western Australia. She is researching drama (Sacred Theatre) as the locus for women to critically reflect on the construction of identity. Her M.Ed research investigated the emergence of a sense of authentic voice for women when participating in drama workshops using female archetypes as the focus. Beryl teaches Early Childhood Drama and Literacy at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.

WOMEN AND DRAMA: TRANSFORMING THE DOUBLE REFRACTION OF THE FICTIONAL AND THE FICTIONAL REAL

... the shock is that the acting makes the inner visible and helps you re-connect. It was all a sense of meeting with myself (Rose's Journal, Chalk, 1997)

This article looks at drama as a means for women to reflect on the construction of identity and considers how parameters for exploring meaning can be developed within the drama. Women have historically been silenced and marginalised in language, discourse, society and culture. The category 'woman' is seen as problematic by many feminists as it both homogenises and offers a site of resistance. How can women develop new terms of reference and metaphor within discourses which marginalise, silence, displace, and distort through misrepresentation? The author draws on experiences of women who participated in a series of drama workshops to investigate how, through drama, they could reflect on the development of personal meaning and a sense of authentic voice. Because women's bodies carry so much cultural significance as both flesh and blood identity and symbolic construct (Dobie, 1995, p.230) drama, with its emphasis on embodiment, is a perfect space (locus) for women to become their own representers, agents and subjects. It is through the drama that women can uncover 'mark' and affirm silenced aspects of themselves. Throughout this piece the term 'woman' is not used symbolically as in the philosophical dialectic but refers to the living, flesh and blood person.

How can women make counterfeit the currency of our representational economy? (Phelan, 1993, p.164).

I will do my own naming (Esme's Journal)

I will be my own gatekeeper (Chami's Journal)

Why Challenge the Identity of Women?

The experiential differences of men and women are not the result of 'nature' but the assignment of sex roles - women's and men's lives are socially structured in such a way as to provide disparate realities for each (Dobie, 1995, p. 216). From the tradition of Western philosophy we are perceived through a gender lens and the generic 'he' is used to represent all subjects. The female subjects represented by the generic 'he' have traditionally had no influence in setting the terms of reference but are required to act and react according to the masculine ideal (Shildrick, 1997). However, the category 'woman' disguises the hybridity of women who must occupy a subject position that is always split by race, class, sexual preference, history and simultaneously is assigned the category 'female'. Gender and sex dualities therefore permeate all aspects of a female/woman's life. (Battersby, 1998).

the intellectual part of me had not lived .. women were to marry and have babies. Therefore I had no intellect

(Black Swan's Journal)

[t]he world's 2.8 billion women remain the most marginalized group . in many countries there is a vast gap between women's rights on paper, according to law and policy, and their actual experience (United Nations, 1996, p.7).

So, although the category *woman* may be problematic as it runs the risk of being taken as a separatist concept thereby continuing the historical gender divide the author believes that for women to critically reflect on their lives the category *women* cannot be denied. The category *woman* or *women* suggests separatist notions which creates paradox and ambiguity but the fact that women have been seen as 'other', legislated as other and have had to live as other means that they may see what men have observed and examined and portrayed in a different way (Waugh, 1995, p. 412). Women need first know who they are before they can begin to examine and reflect on contingencies which influence their lives - women need separate places and all female gatherings to form the critical culture that can give them an autonomous ground from which to critique the patriarchy (Hogan, 1995, p.116). Drama communities can be the locus for this critical culture.

The most powerful aspect of the workshops was the single sex aspect. I can't relax with men

around, they are part of history and my history. I expect them to have expectations of me. In fact this is one of the insights came to me as we worked, of how I expect men to be towards me and I realised that I need to change first (Author).

One of the difficulties in categorizing women as such is the multiplicity of feminisms in contemporary feminist theory (Johnson-Roullier, 1995, p.18). Feminism is not about creating a united 'sisterhood' but a feminism which recognizes the intersections of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and other currents which contribute to the formation of 'cultural (non) identity' (Butler in Johnson-Roullier, 1995, p.187). In designing the drama workshops exclusively for women the author realised the inherent risk of creating yet another hierarchy which would be seen to be complying with gender duality as a given. Neither was the aim for participants to develop a personal meaning as a *woman* but to make visible the contingencies such as the context and codes that govern the construction of meaning for women who live within the influences of being categorised (Cousins, 1987, p.34). To maintain the category recognizes its use as an heuristic category which enables a focus on women's experiences as intertextually constituted subject positions (Fulkerston in Arnold, 1998). The intertextuality recognizes that no single condition or sum of conditions can be the sole cause of personal meanings or identities. Just as gender is contingent, so 'personal meaning' and 'self identity' are contingent on the complexities of experience including the historical, cultural, social, political and religious contexts within which they are situated.

To give up 'gender' would eliminate an heuristic category and useful analytical tool - to not have gender or the category women cuts ourselves off from the source of feminism's transformative possibilities (Antony in Kourany, 1998, p.69,). We still have no idea of what a society might be like where a person's sex is not regarded as a major feature of social and political status.

It has been claimed that women have been split from each other across class, generation and cultural lines and need a collectivisation of women's experience (Hogan, 1995, p.116). Drama workshops which encourage reflection on their experiences can afford women the opportunity to form a critical culture from which to question the discourses and contingencies which frame and shape their lives [w]oman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement (Cixous, 1981, p.245).

I want to be able to reconcile things within an historical context, when you work like this [drama] you see yourself in a different way (Author).

An heuristic use of gender does not re-enforce or comply with gender duality but affords a way into cultural critique (Bordo in Kourany, 1998, p.305) through which a more inclusive understanding of the construction of personal meaning and identity may be developed; perceived identity supports a focus on women's construction of their personal meanings and self identity.

When *woman* is the looking glass which is held to women (Cousins, 1987, p.22) new terms of reference and a new metaphor is invoked by which the contingencies of identity may become known and redefined to intersect discourses which marginalise and displace. The metaphor of reflection is problematic for women as the image the woman sees is already refracted by psychological, institutional and social forces (Markham, 1999, p.56) which shape the mirrored image. *Woman* is symbolically the mercury which reflects back the individuated, detached, transcendent ego-self of the male viewer. The traditional symbolic use of the term *woman* has been damaging for the flesh and blood woman. This symbolic representation has been used strategically throughout western history to marginalise and objectify women. As Markham suggests, there can be impediments to reflection (p.58) and as women's bodies are always marked by gender and positioned in relation to and measured against an inaccessible bodily ideal (in part determined by a universalised male body) (Schildrick, 1997, p.50) the image in the metaphorical mirror is refracted or distorted according to the normatives of politics, reproduction, economics, race, social position and gender. The 'mirror' metaphor is frequently used in discussions about drama with no consideration that the metaphor itself may further marginalise women.

The *woman* who is held as the looking glass to women is the living flesh and blood woman who has resisted the normative refractions of the symbolic image and disrupted the misrepresentations exemplified by both flesh and blood and symbolic ideals. Women can choose to ignore the dictates of fashion, refuse to defer to patriarchy, question the interfering role of technology in pregnancy and redress the distorting impact of religious symbols. This is the praxis.

Drama Praxis as a Change Agent for Women

Historically women have been identified in terms of being 'in relation to' (Hampson,1990), i.e. they have not been recognised and valued as independent individuals but named and recognised only when in relationship with someone 'other' - father, mother, husband. The woman has always been in the subordinate position economically, legally and socially in these unequal relationships and until very recently this was substantiated by law.

Except that over these years, the woman, his wife, has begun to think of her name, her maiden name, which is really only the name of her father. She thinks also of her mother's maiden name and that too is the name of her father. She thinks of all the women stretching back and back and she realises she doesn't know their names. To her it's as if, nameless, they are lost. How many generations will it take for her name to be lost? Her daughter's? Her granddaughter's? Wherever she goes she takes with her these long queues of lost women. (Modjeska, 1994, p.95).

Both the real and imaginal operate within the drama context. (Ross ,1996; O'Toole, 1992). The real context consists of the participant's attitudes, beliefs, cultural loading, physiology, social status and history. What some call the gestalt and the author calls the sum total of my life's experiences, brought to this moment in this space. The fictional context is the make believe world created within the drama text which is not a pre-determined script but is created by and because of the actual dramatic event (O'Toole, p.4). As these two contexts operate within each other the Metaxis of drama is at work (p.13) in which the interplay of the 'as if' with the 'is' (Phelan, 1993, Courtney, 1995) and the immediacy of the relation transform meaning (Brook, 1968, p.25). As both contexts, the real and the imaginal, interact there is no certainty as to how the process works; the fictional context may be a refraction of the real context to leave residual, operative traces (O'Toole, 1992, p.13). For women, as previously mentioned, the mirror metaphor is problematic as the refraction of the real context may be a double distortion which is more complex that the double perception of one voice among many mentioned by Nicholson (p.87, 1999). Thus, the term 'double refraction' calls for a reconceptualisation of 'double perception' and 'mimesis' through the gender lens. If mimesis is about doubling, of being another, of shapeshifting and pandering to reflections (Diamond, 1997) then women somehow must find a way to disrupt the double refraction in the mirror. O'Sullivan discusses this in relation to Anorexia Nervosa in which young women absent themselves by ceasing to exist, this is an extreme response to the fictional woman and the fictional 'real' constructed by the masculinist ideal. Another example, not life threatening but definitely not life affirming is the use of the word 'tart' to describe female behaviour and appearance. There is no equivalent term to describe heterosexual male behaviour or appearance. As this term is a value judgment on behaviour how does a woman who looks in the mirror and sees a 'tart' actually know what she is seeing? She faces a double refraction, the 'tart' is a false construct but the woman behind the 'tart' is also false. Through the drama process the real or falsely constructed real can be seen differently within the fiction and the seeing itself may alter, what Huber (1995) calls a 'perceptual shift'. If the woman rejects the fictional real - I do not see a 'tart' - she has begun to redress the double refraction. The imagination works at negotiating both the imaginal and the real which may leave traces on the real context, thus providing new insights and meanings which enable a re-working, re-visioning re-cognising and re-alignment. O'Toole and Ross speak so easily of the real within the not real giving a universal certainty to the mirror metaphor as suitable for all drama participants 'the fictional context may be a refraction of the real context' (O'Toole, 1992, p.13) to authenticate the work - in Winnicott's terms, to have it 'reflected back' (Ross, 1996, p. 55). To develop new terms of reference and metaphor within discourses which marginalise, silence, displace, and distort through misrepresentation women must displace the gilt on the mirror.

Drama is about the possibility of transformation of our selves - our knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, even bodily posture, drama can transform the way we present ourselves to the world. Within the drama we can disrupt the misrepresentations of our bodies. Engaging the body can take us beyond the safety of cognitive processes and the objectivity of the scientific paradigm to the threshold of possibly unknown territory in which conceptual, personal, social and behavioural changes can take place (Landy, 1986).

Because the most valuable perceptions of reality are those articulated by bodily presencewhen we immerse ourselves in the experience of being alive in the body then meaning becomes something lived rather than examined (Grainger, 1993, p.169). Scientific truth is only one way of knowing, there is another system of knowing based on the knowledge of experience (Lovell, 1990, p.112), what McLaren calls 'visceral knowing' (1993, p.256). The body is the most sensitive and accurate instrument we have. To read its sensations gives a strong sense of reality. All bodies see, feel, hear in

the same way but cultural influences and constraints shape individual responses. We react to each other's reactions and within those actions lie all the resources of our unconscious senses, we broadcast to each other through a continually changing field of resonance, like a choir of visibles and invisibles (Redgrove, 1978, p.113). Given that the oppression of women is deeply internalised (Wehr, 1987; Lovell, 1991) to a point where the oppression is accepted as the norm, it is necessary to move beyond cognitive knowing to access the tacit dimension which rests within the body and the unconscious. Rubin (1994) calls this the fleshing of the story into physical form through a powerful medium (the body) which is dynamic and interactive. The body is another threshold out of which the story can 'become'. As Lovell (1991, p.69) says, 'What can I trust? It seemed I could trust my body to speak to me; one missing part however, was to trust myself to hear my body talking! Can I trust myself to recall our ancient right to incorporate our symbolic mind (E.Weiland, personal communication, October, 1996). By working with symbols, images, text and movement a link can be made between the inner and outer worlds, the multiple layered dramatic metaphor allows us to come face to face with the unfaceable (Jennings & Minde, 1993, p.27).

Drama as Locus and Catalyst

Drama is a powerful medium in which participants construct their own parameters of involvement and degree of self declaration thus creating a sense of empowerment and ownership of text and context. This in turn creates authentic meanings for each individual.

... there were times when I felt uncomfortable, I feel very self conscious with the drama and movement, but as there was no pressure to join in I could sit with my feelings and started to get some ideas about where my discomfort came from, this was new to me. Id never been given the space and permission to just be uncomfortable, people sort of force you to examine or overcome it, but in these workshops I was left alone and it made a difference. In this way the drama was very liberating which may sound strange for someone who chose not to participate, but because I didn't feel under pressure I found myself seeing myself, in that way I was forced to negotiate with my feelings, it's as though in the drama you see yourself as you are even when it is someone else who is doing it (Medina's Journal).

In drama women can find an authentic 'voice' i.e., the speaker is 'heard'. It is common for many women to meet conditions and consequences of decisions in which they had no voice, They may have the agency to speak and engage in self representation but are literally not heard. When a speaker has authentic voice the agreements reached between speaker and listener are adequate and appropriate to the needs of the speaker.

Drama is a group act which emphasises the intuitive, creative aspects of human interaction in which the tension of the dramatic act enhances awareness and behaviour at a personal and social level (p.29). It is a means of experiencing and reflecting on experience in a profound way, a way of thinking through an issue by means of a dialectical construct (Ross, 1996) drawing issues into confrontation ahead of theorising.

Personal knowledge and tacit knowing come into play, a combination of thinking and action, a learning as we live through existence (Courtney, 1982, p.221) which includes hunches, guesses and intentions. Goffman (cited in Courtney, 1982, p.71) queries the assumption that a wide range of existential learnings can transfer from enactments and this same issue is taken up by O'Toole (1992) in his discussion on the universal and the specific. This applies to all learning, there is no guarantee that learning from one situation or context will be transferred and applied to new contexts. According to Goffman and O'Toole new meanings will only occur if the fictional context contains something of the real context (1992, p.97). This is assuming that the real itself is not constructed from a fiction and for women this is the never to be achieved normative male ideal of the women. Franks (1996) considers how the subjective positions represented in the bodies of drama participants are not seen as significant in the drama (p.112). The realities of the drama, the everyday, the actual and the representational, the fictional (Landy, 1986, p.11) must interact, interplay, become a creative synthesis.

...the shock is that the acting makes the inner visible and helps you re-connect, it was all a sense of meeting with myself (Rose's Journal).

By working with drama a group can work collaboratively on general, existential learning and specific items of learning (Courtney, 1982, p.221) but the extent of the meaning created depends entirely on each individual. Drama and other expressive arts are, in fact, living behaviour (J. Walker, personal

communication, October 2, 1994). They were once the, native tongue of mankind [sic] (E.G.Horovitz, personal communication, October, 1996), thus, the significance to an objective truth is the felt meaning (p.145), the significance of the experience creates the extent and depth of the meaning for each individual.

... it is a way of knowing which goes beyond the five senses. I have learned to trust my instincts and my intuition, I've reconnected with them as I feel now they have always been there I just didn't know how to reach).

What is specific to one may be general to another. As Courtney says, 'It is myself who gives it meaning, I acknowledge it contains my own potential' (p.145). True meaning is felt and affective; the drama dialogue authenticates one's own experience, i.e., the dialogue is peculiar to the speaker and adequate to express her needs (Ross, 1996, p.55). We can only have our own experience: I am struck increasingly with the impossibility of getting outside my own skin. The more I try to grasp someone else's experience, the more I am impressed with how hard it is, how much beyond me that other experience really is (Krieger, 1991, p.54).

The Drama Space: Proximity and Distance

Through engagement in the expressive arts women can explore the realities of their lives because, all art expresses things we are unable to express in any other way (Jennings & Minde, 1993, p.18) but it is the distancing within the art form which both contains the experience and allows it to be seen from many perspectives. Participants engaged in drama processes are both watcher and watched, player and witness, never quite totally involved, always partly watching themselves and others and therefore the individual is protected from being overwhelmed in the process of facing that which could not be faced

There was a mirror of me reflected back so clearly, what a mix of feelings. I realise that I need to look to others for support (Author).

It is this containment aspect of the drama which creates a boundary from the outside world in which internalised worlds can be externalised (Landy, 1992, p.100), new worlds are created and like traditional theatre, the drama stage, the contained space allows the interplay between the real and unreal, the self and non-self. What occurs in the drama praxis is once removed from everyday reality, taking place in a reality which is different in space, time and consequence (Landy, 1986, p.5).

The levels of meaning for me were in the ritual and the images of the archetype, they seemed to unlock things for me, they are the opening, you are in control, it's not like a personal affront (Ursula's Journal).

To disrupt the status quo requires strength, courage and resilience. By engaging in drama, in which there are both elements of the real context, the fictionalised real and fictional context, false constructs can be challenged and disrupted in safety. Through drama praxis perceptual shifts occur as the false construct is recognised and challenged thereby creating the possibility for a re-alignment and recognition of the real. It is the possibility of the immediacy of perceptual shifts which gives such vitality and validity to the drama process.

As my partner sculpted me and named me she saw something in me that I didn't know was there. She placed my feet apart and I had one arm pointing straight ahead. She turned my head so that I looked straight ahead. 'You can see beyond the horizon' she said, 'You always hold the vision and stand firm with its promise no matter what the circumstances'.

I felt in awe of what she saw in me. I didn't know I had that sort of strength. But I felt it seeping through my body as though it had always been there waiting to be recognised and claimed. I turned to my partner, "YES!" (personal communication, Sacred Theatre workshop, 1995).

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