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Text in performance — or not

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A rich and varied history of literature in performance is evidenced by such a work as David W. Thompson's *Performance of Literature in Historical Perspective*¹, a collection of thirty-three centuries-spanning essays on the subject. I have been involved with an endeavor during the past several years which may provide still another approach to text performance. Without claiming uniqueness, I simply wish to outline my work with performance pieces from Native American materials with a university course.

What we accomplished with preparation and performance resembles one or another of the various categories usually identified as Readers, Chamber, or Interpretative theatre. There are differences, but in any event, the nomenclature becomes unimportant in this instance : public performance was entirely secondary and in fact sometimes did not occur. The process of the work itself, for the participants, was the real focus of the course.

I realize, of course, that many of us — and especially most working with theatre and performance — are strong advocates of an inherent value in process. As a stage director and teacher in the conventional contexts of such activity, I too am cognizant of, and an emphatic proponent for, such value. What I wish to emphasize here is that the clientele, if you will, for this Native American literature study included a broad variety of students from throughout the university. They were students who took the course because of an interest in the subject area and / or because it was a course which might be chosen to satisfy an all-university distribution requirement. In other words, they generally did not come to the work because of an interest in theatre or performance or even in most instances a particular interest in literature. Certainly they did not come because of an interest in oral interpretation.

I spend time with this setting of the context and its participants because of its significance to the activity and its value for discussion — and, perhaps, to its replication. This context of “non-trained” performance preparation is important : a “professional attitude” in the sense of serious intent and effort is, as always, vital ; and a gradual experiencing and even “rehearsing” of the exercises involved is necessary. Still, there is an “anyone-can-do-it” nature to the endeavor.

This approach substantially informs the accomplishment of an affective learning experience. It exemplifies a process of gradually “feeling-into” the characters, situation, and context of the “other world” of the story-teller. The original material is experimented with and experienced by a group finding its way — individually and collectively — into that world and then finding its way “out” again through discovering how to transform the essence of that material into physical activity. The exercises leading to such activity, although initially threatening to many participants, surprisingly quickly become very acceptable. More than that, they become significantly meaningful : the participant as a person becomes “available” in order to discover himself, others, and the material. Concepts are both physicalized (illustrated) for an observer if there is such and internalized for the participant. Words and the actions are synergized into new dimensions neither had alone ; that piece of literature, perhaps as never before, is *understood*. It is understood with the entire body rather than solely with the mind. There seems then an integration of the *felt* meanings of the literature.

An article in Thompson's book, “From Academic to Psycho-Social Uses of Literature,” by David A. Williams, speaks of striving to “treat literature experientially.”² Much of the article

¹ (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

² David A. Williams, “From Academic to Psycho-Social Uses of Literature”, *Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives*, ed. David W. Thompson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983) 424.

is discussing a long history of arguments for the need to realize and foster the experiencing of literature more than, or at least equal to, the critiquing of it. Williams cites Lee Roloff, for example, as rather specifically calling for the study of literature through “a performing self.” One may “lead the student to respond with all his being to the “touch of art” — to that which is most expressive of man, and in so doing, by that touch, to be changed.’ ”³ In extended discussion, Williams also cites many who consider literature as therapeutic, as communicative (with an emphasis on experiential communication), and as being socially useful.

The significant distinction of work to which I am referring is different from the usual one of either interpretative performance or understanding literature. My purpose was that of using literature in performance to teach something of Native American cultures : less grandiosely and more particularly, to teach something of another world view, of what’s important and most meaningful to a people or to a singular representative of a people. If the change that is learning occurs, then perhaps one might speak of literature-in-performance as a change agent in the manner to which Roloff alludes.

Let us now address some specific examples of physicalization exercises in relation to a particular piece of literature with which we worked. *Seven Arrows*, by Hyemeyohsts Storm (Crow / Northern Cheyenne), was an ideal resource : it incorporates Teaching Story legends as well as discussion of the culture, meanings within it, and stories of people living in that world and encountering changes occurring within it. The form is as poetic in an informal sense as it is narrative in a traditional sense.

Those who might be familiar with the novel will recognize how central the image of mirroring is to that world. As Storm says, “In many ways this Circle, the Medicine Wheel, can best be understood if you think of it as a mirror in which everything is reflected. ‘The Universe is the Mirror of the People,’ the old Teachers tell us, ‘and each person is a Mirror to every other person.’ ”⁴ A mirroring exercise, then, exemplifies one which is both an illustrative and an experiential metaphor for Storm’s statements.

In its simplest form, this exercise involves two people facing each other, with one reflecting the other’s movements. A wide range of possibilities is available — from simple, slow and abstract arm movement being mirrored, to more complex whole-body and sound reflections, and even to various mutations such as a sound reflecting a movement. This is now of course an old and much-used “acting exercise” ; earlier in my work it was not quite so familiar.

And certainly, with non-acting participants it remains a valuable activity. There is the immediate workshop value to this exercise as it requires a centered, individual concentration coupled with a cooperative working together. The two people are attempting to reflect each other so that it is impossible to tell who is initiating and who reflecting. Attaining this requires an almost mystical attunement to each other. Additionally, mirroring couples move about the space and also must then be aware of others while nonetheless maintaining their own focused mutual attunement.

The richness of this work becomes apparent as we consider the multi-faceted nature of this instance : first is its value as a workshop exercise without narrative — offering individual, paired, and general group cooperative effort ; second, there is an experiencing of the “mirror-nature” of the world ; and third, with narration and a viewer it becomes an illustration of a concept. It becomes a “metaphorical physicalization” of the literary text. Various other exercises and games requiring trust, centering, group awareness, and cooperative activity are examples of the kind of workshop techniques also effective as physical metaphors.

It is difficult to illustrate without complicated playscript format (or physical workshop activity), but let me attempt to create the context more fully. My first example is from the

³ Williams, 425-6, citing Leland H. Roloff, *The Perception and Evocation of Literature* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1973) Preface.

⁴ Hyemeyohsts Storm, *Seven Arrows* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1972) 5.

introductory material in Storm's book. Participants were seated in a large circle on the floor. There were usually twenty-five to thirty people, and their circle delineated a "playing space." Each person worked with Centering : a few already had some particular technique or another which they used for relaxation or meditation ; for those who did not, guiding them to the gestalt exercise of reminding themselves "right now I am aware of..." worked well in helping them to Center.

Narration began with Storm's words about the Medicine Wheel Way :

You are about to begin an adventure of the People, the Plains Indian People. The story of these people has at its center and all around it the story of the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel is the very Way of Life of the People. It is an Understanding of the Universe.⁵

As narration began, the people rose and moved into forming a Medicine Wheel shape : a small center circle, with "spokes" at four cardinal directions and an outer "rim" circle, then again sat themselves on the floor. By movement they became the physical shape of the Wheel which Storm indicates in his book as stones placed upon the earth by a Teacher.

When the narration continued, "The Medicine Wheel Way begins with the Touching of our Brothers and Sisters," people rose and randomly paired off with each other. As they did this, they began a touching exercise. Most often used for this was an eyes-closed face discovery exercise in which each participant softly discovered the partner's face with both hands.

I might mention that this particular exercise is probably the single most telling one in respect to the intimidating, threatening quality of the work for some ; it is initially a very difficult exercise for many people to allow themselves to do. Consequently, it is one I usually brought into the sessions only after several simpler, less-threatening exercises.

Following further narration of the Touching, Storm speaks of the Medicine Wheel as a mirror. At this point the people gradually withdrew their hands from the face, opened their eyes and began the mirror exercise already mentioned.

Next we might look at examples which occurred during narration and / or dialogue with one of the Teaching Stories in *Seven Arrows*. When Hawk guides Bull Looks Around on his Vision Quest, he tells him the story of Jumping Mouse.

When a person as Hawk began the story, "Once there was a Mouse. He was a busy mouse, searching everywhere..."⁶, the group or part of it rose from a seated position around the circle and randomly-placed itself in the center of the playing space. Those people closed their eyes and began a slow, very tiny-step shuffle. Narration continued as this fairly tight little group softly shuffled about, constantly but lightly bumping each other and shuffling away.

Several particularly important points to be made in respect to this activity are : with eyes closed, one was somewhat vulnerable ; the shuffle of feet (bare or stocking-footed) was minuscule and generally fairly slow, the bumping light and safe ; each time someone made contact with another, s/he reacted away from the contact ; and finally, no one tried to *act* like mice.

Whether participant or audience, this activity gave one a sense of busily, blindly scurrying about — and fit effectively with the narration regarding busy mice, mice too busy to be aware of or really care about the world around them.

This is, then, an excellent example of a general principle attempted throughout the work : people do *not* try to "act like" a creature or whatever ; yet the activity suits the words of the narration. Even in dialogue sequences, as when Raccoon came to speak to the one mouse of the group who paid attention to an intriguing sound and wanted to find out about it, neither person tried to act like the animal they "portrayed." They were simply themselves standing speaking to each other, separated from the other scurrying mice who refused to acknowledge

⁵ Storm 1.

⁶ Storm 68.

the sound. Similarly during other narration and dialogue exchanges as Mouse meets Frog, Buffalo and Wolf.

The physical activity and formations shaped solely by the bodies of participants during the telling of this story varied widely. As the story told of Mouse gathering her courage and running across the dangerous prairie, for example, the person portraying Mouse ran randomly about the space. She encountered a melee of bodies as others quickly and randomly placed themselves into a collection of various grotesque positions. They were generally, loosely, in a small circle formation and in varying ways connected to each other. Inside this scraggly collection of bodies, arms, and legs sat another person who spoke the lines of Old Mouse when Jumping Mouse crawled into the safety of the “sagebrush.”

Finally, there is an example from the novel which includes *people* : Hawk, Night Bear, and some friends and events in their lives. In other words, we have had reference to the introductory Medicine Way material and to the Jumping Mouse story ; this third facet involved, as one example, an attack in which Hawk is killed. The script included a very brief couple lines of dialogue between Hawk and Night Bear as they began a journey from one camp to another. Narration then brought us to the moment of an attack. Most of the group were seated in a circle around the open space in which Hawk, Night Bear and three or four others were simply walking.

At the moment of reference to the attack, all those on the circle rose and rushed across the space to the opposite side. It was important to try *not* to shout because of a tendency to emit a stereotyped “war whoop.” Rather, there was simply the melee of people rushing about. Often there would be sound, but emphasizing the point about not yelling accomplished a more spontaneous and brief sound without falling into the stereotype.

While all those from the seated circle were rushing across the space — which we must remember was already occupied — Night Bear and one of the others “escaped” to some place beyond the circle ; all the rest except Hawk fell “dead” upon the floor ; and Hawk stood in place with his hands behind his back as if tied to a tree.

The picture, then, became one of Hawk standing tied, and two, three, or four bodies lying about the space (these were random choices at the beginning of this “scene” when Hawk and Night Bear first began their travel). The rest of the group was reseated after the dash across the space ; and Night Bear and one other were out of the playing area.

This activity included — for the people involved as well as any observers — a sudden, violent-feeling rush of bodies, collisions and general chaos followed by a stillness with people lying about and one man standing. Subsequent action included narration and dialogue as “attackers” came to the space and spoke to Hawk before “stabbing and killing” him. Part of the dialogue was carried on in gibberish because Hawk could not understand the language of the attackers ; Hawk’s death was simply portrayed by one of the men thrusting his hand toward Hawk’s belly as the Narrator spoke of the stabbing. Hawk slowly “collapsed” as his “hands tied to the tree” held him from falling completely forward.

The spareness and simplicity of this scene illustrates well the lack of necessity for elaborateness in any aspect of presentation. That moment of Hawk’s collapse, his knees buckled, body apparently limp, and clasped hands stretched up behind him never failed to be a powerful one. For audience and for participants.

In sum, there are several different but interrelated facets of this special use of literature in performance. Most simply considered, the idea is that of trying to learn about something through creating physical actions appropriate to illustration, evocation, and statement regarding the particular work and its subject matter. In order to do this, participants must not only read and discuss the material with which they are working ; they must also try to “feel themselves into it.”

The group physical effort immeasurably enhances the intellectual and analytical effort toward a fuller understanding of the material. And particularly because the students were not actors, the relaxation, imagination, concentration, and “letting-go” exercises, and experimentation became extremely important. They helped a group of strangers quickly become able to share with each other, to brainstorm with little intimidation, and to “get up and make fools of themselves” with each other. There was an increased self-awareness and sensory perception ; a decreased self-consciousness became evident in creating and performing before and with others, in spite of the fact that most participants had never before been involved with such creation and performance.

It is important to note also, however, that performance in the strictest sense of playing before a general public is not an absolute necessity. As already briefly mentioned, an attitude toward preparing for performance is important ; and there is no question whatever that the actuality of experiencing the energy, electricity, uncertainty, and spontaneity of being with an audience provides an exceptional dimension to the work. Nevertheless, simply the process of working with the material toward that end accomplishes much of the goal.

Additionally, since a significant facet of the work and its sources is concerned with cooperative group investigation, experimentation, and active-participation effort, I found that when that effort did *not* come together effectively enough to result in public performance, students nonetheless learned a lesson from that very loss. It was a more painful lesson because of the loss, but a lesson still about the “subject” with which they had been struggling.

These combinations of personal growth and learning of Native cultures have been the bases of my excitement with such work.