

On Writing as Transgression

Teachers of young playwrights need to turn them into dangerous citizens

BY NAOMI WALLACE

Writing for the theatre is at its best an act of transgression—and as teachers of playwrights, we should encourage our students to step over the line, redraw the line, erase the line, even multiply the lines so that we sit up, step forward, strike out.

If an intellectual or a writer is “a worker in ideas who uses words as the primary means of production,” as Ngugi wa Thiong’o has said, the question then becomes how do we encourage our students to appropriate the means of production (to own language, to be responsible for their writing and to be responsive to that of others) and also have them ask: To what ends am I working? Is my writing merely an exercise in accumulating and/or defending private property, as it were, or a collective endeavor (even when pursued in solitude) that draws upon and adds to a community of writers and practitioners?

In other words, to what purpose, in whose interest am I (are you) writing? As teachers, students and writers, what is our relationship to the status quo, the powers that be and were, to commonly held assumptions and stereotypes? Is it a relationship of confirmation or challenge? Are we polishers or a pain in the ass? (And to be a pain in the ass is, I think, a noble enterprise.)

I believe the job of mainstream culture and mainstream theatre is to keep the peace. Our job, as teachers, is to encour-

age new writers to break it, to disrupt the lie, to speak truth to power. Think seriously about the word *en-courage*: What are we giving our students courage to do, exactly? Not just entertain.

Rarely do students of drama enter the classroom with what we might call, for lack of a better term, “original minds.” Surely their originality, their agency for questioning and considering, is there, but it has been dominated and subdued by a culture that amplifies individuality over community, profit over peace, property over human need. For we live in a culture that is hostile to creativity and original thought that does not serve capitalism, empire, and the most virulent by-products of those forces: racism, homophobia, classism and sexism. Young writers very often bring these values, albeit largely unconsciously, into the classroom and into their writing. And these values make for a diminished, shallow, shopworn and deadening dramatic arts.

As teachers, we can help writers become aware of what products their writing is “selling”—what values, what reflexes, what assumptions lie below the surface, the dead-weight of which will drag the writing into mediocrity. For all theatre, as Brecht reminds us, is political, and by political we mean human and social in its interaction and impact. All theatre deals with questions of power. Who has it? Who doesn’t?

Who wants to get it and how? Who lost it and why? Who has killed for it? Who has died for it?

Mainstream theatre, embroiled as it is in mainstream cultural and economic pressures, tends to reward and applaud those who ask the questions that allow for its continued existence, albeit with a few adjustments here and there. But overall the status quo stands largely untouched: Heterosexuality continues to be foregrounded; white privilege continues to go unquestioned; writing against injustice continues to be sidelined; and to question our most deeply felt assumptions is, finally, deemed unproductive, not to mention impolite.

When I speak of “writing as transgression,” I am calling for a teaching of theatre that encourages students to write against their “taught” selves and to engage, as bell hooks puts it, in the kind of “self-transgression” and “critical awareness of self” that will enable them to become, as John Donne suggests, “citizens of the world.” Transgression is, among other things, a dissection of one’s self and a discovery of larger worlds. Both processes (or perhaps they are one) involve questioning entitlement and empathy.



RICHARD ANDERSON

Erika LaVonn and Steven Cole Hughes in Naomi Wallace’s *Things of Dry Hours*, directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah at CENTERSTAGE in Baltimore, Md.

While Britain is, I believe, more tolerant about transgressive theatre than the U.S., students in both countries are often hesitant to write politically. They are afraid of being deemed doctrinaire, boring, uncreative or P.C. (And let me digress here to say that I agree with Marcus Brigstocke that “accusations

of ‘politically correct thought control’ have become a pathetic and transparent excuse for lazy racists, sexists and Islamophobes the land over.”) Worse, students may fear that a politically and morally informed writing might ultimately hamper their career prospects.

We must encourage students to realize that engaging with history—engaging with the collective human dramas around us—does not lead to a dead end for writers; and here let me simply cite the examples of Arthur Miller, Tony Kushner, Adrienne Kennedy, August Wilson, Dario Fo, Harold Pinter, Caryl Churchill, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Tracey Scott Wilson, Debbie Tucker Green, Chay Yew and Robert O’Hara, to name but a few. Historically, theatre has been synonymous with politically challenging and socially pressing subjects. Shakespeare, Sheridan, Shaw and Storey spring to mind.

But there can never be enough of a good thing: We need more engaged and dissenting writers in theatre. We need more writers who envision theatre as a space for social and imaginative transformation.

I tend to generalize. I like to generalize. But what are some of the specific ways we can move students to think outside their own experience, their own gender, their own race, their own class? Here are six ways (perhaps irresponsibly vague ways, but I hope helpful) in which we can nudge these new writers to transgress:

- Help them to identify their “ways of seeing,” to use John Berger’s term—the socially and culturally determined choices they make when writing.

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■ Encourage them to critique these accepted ways of seeing and to write, as Walter Benjamin suggests, against/around and through them—to write against the grain.

■ Study the linguistic mechanisms—the lingo, jargon, rhetoric, obfuscations, coinage—through which inhuman systems are maintained.

■ Disrupt the cliché and the cluttered mind. By this I mean to work against the grit and garbage that passes for information and that we have been trained to consume hour in and hour out. For example, if we ask ourselves whose husband Brad Pitt used to be, most of us will know, despite ourselves, that it was Jennifer Aniston, and that he is now partnered with the gorgeous Angelina Jolie. But if we ask ourselves how many tons of radioactive waste were left behind by the British and American forces in the first Gulf War, across a region that was once known as the land of dates, it might take a little more time to come up with the answer (350 tons). One might suspect that our knowledge about Mr. Pitt is nurtured precisely to obscure more pressing issues.

■ Encourage this new agency and/or flourishing of the writer with required readings that include not only Euripides, Webster, Behn, Shakespeare, Chekhov and Brecht, but the more recent transgressive writings of Heiner Müller, Edward Bond, Trevor Griffiths, Wole Soyinka, Georg Büchner, Betty Shamieh, Richard Montoya, Kwame Kwei-Armah (who should be mentioned twice), Ismail Khalidi and Kia Corthron. And that is an ungratefully small list.

■ Encourage students of playwriting to read history, constantly, aggressively—to inform themselves thoroughly of the subject matter about which they write. As Berger wrote at the end of the last century: “In the modern world in which thousands of people are dying every hour as a consequence of politics, no writing anywhere can begin to be credible unless it is informed by political awareness and principles. Writers who have neither produce utopian trash. The unpardonable perversity of our fin de siècle is that of its innocence.” Yes, that’s harsh. Perhaps Berger’s words even seem inflexible and unforgiving, but the call for informed writing is one of crucial importance. If writers can reimagine language, with an effort that aspires to fluency in history and its myriad forces, then we can reimagine ourselves and our communities—and that, for me as a writer, is the highest aspiration.

SOMETIMES I AM ASKED ABOUT

“dryness”—which I think translates for the questioner into writing devoid of passion and complexity and entertainment. The suggestion is that encouraging students to examine, question and resist mainstream culture and theatre will be “off-putting,” will unplug students from their creative juices, as though creative juice is something outside history, outside politics and social cause-and-effect. In fact, I think that a more ferocious creative juice can be found in the veins of history, which, sadly, are too often filled with blood. Not the blood of the few, not the blood of the privileged, but the blood of the many.

If not the question of dryness, I’m confronted with the question of sex, or the lack of it. Intimacy, when writing, is political, and I think we must acknowledge to students that the human dramas of politics and economics are very, very sexy and very, very intimate. As the critic Terry Eagleton writes, our economic world is about “the plundering of the body of its sensuous wealth”—how the body is broken down, used and abused under capitalism. What could be more intimate and personal than the history of our bodies and

their relationship to the world?

History itself is a study in intimacy, or our lack of it, with others. What else is history and politics but the struggle of people to define who they are and what they can and cannot do? In two books that should be required reading, Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* and Robin D.G. Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, there are sex and strikes, intrigues and visions, empire and estrangement, murder and the marvelous. You name it, it’s there waiting to be written about.

That millions of innocent women, men and children in Africa have died because of the rampant greed and criminal price-hiking of multinationals is not sexy, but it is intimate. That thousands have died and many thousands more have been maimed in the Middle East by U.S. bullets and shrapnel is again certainly not sexy, but surely very intimate, as is the fact that the bullets that enter the bodies of Palestinian children, fired by Israeli soldiers, are paid for by American taxes earned by American workers who dream of fishing, baseball and sex. What could be more personal than the names that are given

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to the bombs used to tear our fellow humans in Iraq and Afghanistan into as many pieces as possible—Fishbeds, Floggers, Fulcrums. Adams, Beehives and Bouncing Betties. There is even a weapon called Sad Eyes. What could be more intimate or personal than the fact that we get up in the morning, kiss our loved ones, go to work, come home, pay our taxes—and those taxes from our daily labor are used to kill you and you and you, and I never saw your face nor knew your name.

Dramatic, yes. But we are involved in the job of drama—real drama. It is happening all around us, every minute. And the fact is that while we are “all” connected by the Internet, that “all” does not include the 80 percent of the world’s population that has never even made a phone call—because the lives we live here, of abundance and so-called “choice,” are predicated on the impoverishment and suffering of most of the world.

I am not calling for a condescending theatre or a “preach to the converted” theatre but a welcoming, vigorous, inquisitive and brutal theatre. If we encourage our students to dig, they will find the body, in all its intimacy and vulnerability, under the garbage of

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mainstream political rhetoric.

Our job as teachers, as writers with something to humbly give those who will replace us, must be to encourage our students to challenge normative ways of seeing, to get uncomfortable, to get unsafe, to get unsure. To be safe and sure and comfortable in this beautiful, brutalized, vandalized, depleted but continuously awe-inspiring world is in fact to turn away from it—to turn one’s back in large part on life and that age-old succor that writers need: truth.

Our job as teachers is to help students move out of what I like to call the “wow” state of mind to a “how” mind: How did it

come to this? How am I diminished by my own ignorance? How have I been silenced in ways I am not aware of? How do I restore to language, on the stage, an agency and quality that clarifies rather than colludes, that resists rather than conforms? Our job is to encourage our students to become, through their writing, responsible both morally and sensuously—to become dangerous citizens. This should happen if not for moral reasons then for the simple reason of self-preservation, because if we do not, as writers and citizens, engage in resistance to all that diminishes us, then our humanity suffers—and with it, our sensibility as creative writers.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter.” I continue to believe that envisioning a different world is what makes us half-divine. To live and write in a world of resistance to injustice is what makes our lives worthwhile.

Four lines of a poem by Randall Jarrell sum up for me our interconnectedness:

In bombers named for girls,
we burned
The cities we had learned about
in school—
Till our lives wore out; our bodies
lay among
The people we had killed and
never seen.


And as global warming and environmental crises, as well as human migrations, have underlined, we live in an interdependent and unavoidably intimate world: Yorkshire, where I live in England, is closer to Baghdad than we are led to believe. And Kentucky, where I was born, is closer to Gaza or Jerusalem; London closer to Burma (Myanmar) and Jena, La.; New York closer to Colombia and Congo. The distance between us is an ingenious fabrication that it is worth spending our lives, as teachers and writers, tearing down.

Let us transgress together—and by this heat, by the sparks that are generated, make a light to see by, for all of us. ☒

Playwright Naomi Wallace delivered this paper at York St. John University in England, in collaboration with Palatine and the Center for Excellence at York St. John, in October 2007. Her plays include *Things of Dry Hours*, *One Flea Spare*, *In the Heart of America* and *Slaughter City*.

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