

## Deborah Levy Talking Candy

*I avidly read the life histories, interviews, journals, of writers - women writers and artists in particular. I want to know how they earn a living, who their partners are, what sense they make of their lives, how they do their hair, are they in love, were they loved, whether they cook or garden or have children. But I also know that interesting life stories, biographies and events can become boring art.*

It might just be my mood, or the time of year, and this certainly is not a manifesto, but I realise that I do not want to talk about my art in terms of personal stories, biography, etc. If you were to say to me, Deborah ... in your theatre text X when you wrote that monologue for persona Y ... how much of it relates to your own personal experience? I would find the question boring.

That is not to say I would find it boring if someone else came up with an interpretation of the art (whether it be text, performance image, gesture) and its relationship with the author's life. That is what happens when you make public work. However the monologue or image I have written or composed has already become fiction for me. It may have been lifted out of my own life but it has become something that is full of lies and truths, it has been given rhythm and shape ... and I can't think of another word for this so I'll say for now "purity", that often has little semblance to the original event or experience. It is an abstraction, a fabrication. It has become something else.

I am writing this at 6 am on a December morning in London. My daughter (two years old) is sleeping, so this is the time I gather my thoughts, make coffee, return to the part of myself that is a writer. It is nearly Christmas, and over the months I have slowly been collecting materials to make brooches as presents for a few long suffering friends who have to pretend to like the weird things I make them.

I collect materials in much the same way I might make notes in a diary for a book or theatre text. This is what I have collected so far: at my local Turkish grocer's there was a little box of trinkets on the counter, and amongst them I found those blue eyes that I think are worn or painted on houses in some cultures to ward off "evil". Is it called "the evil eye"? So I bought a handful of these and scattered them round the base of a small potted cactus that sits on my study desk, waiting for the right time to use them. In the autumn I was picking up leaves from the garden, to discover a whole lot of grey fluffy feathers on the grass. My cat had caught a bird, and I gathered up some of these feathers and kept them. Finally, for many years I have collected all kinds of maps, my favourite being a very cheap colour reproduction of a map of the world in Urdu.

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So now I have a map of the world that is inscribed in an alphabet that is unfamiliar, blue trinket eyes and the feathers from a mauled bird.

If you were to ask me how these materials relate to my own life experience, I would say something like ... well I think the eye is my own eye staring out at everything. On some of the brooches I have glued little glass tears emerging from the blue eye. I worry superstitiously whether this is bad luck. The feathers ... well I like it that the bird was caught by my cat who left them there for me ... so as I thread them through the eye, I am reminded of that moment picking leaves in autumn. The feathers are not pretty but they are soft ... so I have textures of glass and feathers and a strange alphabet, a combination that kind of feels erotic to me. But in the end, whatever I make has to work without this exploration. That is how I feel about biographies etc. in art.

Now I do think we should attempt to analyse and interpret ... this is not an argument for saying "oh it's all enigma and mystery", because some very bad work is made using these words to defend it. I avidly read the life histories, interviews, journals of writers - women writers and artists in particular. I want to know how they earn a living, who their partners are, what sense they make of their lives, how they do their hair, are they in love, were they loved, whether they cook or garden or have children. But I also know that interesting life stories, biographies and events can become boring art. There is nothing I loathe more than a bunch of people on stage telling stories. Everyday experiences or an interesting or a sad life must not be confused with art. Sometimes it is, but mostly it is not.

Now on to motherhood. Although I am in a silent mood ... I do know that unfortunately women can't afford to be silent. Mothers especially cannot afford to be silent. I say this with new knowledge,

because I have become a mother. There is nothing that prepared me for the shock of how pushing a child in a pram on the streets makes you an invisible citizen, or how potent a figure a mother and child is for every sort of projection going - good and bad. I believe for many mothers struggling to make a meaningful life for themselves and their children, it is the love their children give back to them that gives them any self esteem at all.

Recently, I had a tense conversation with a friend who does not have children, and who was angry that a woman had brought her screaming baby to a conference. Apparently this mother had known there were no crèche facilities and the conference had been disrupted. There was a time when I would have agreed with my friend, but life has a way of playing tricks on your attitudes. So I said I reckoned that when a woman brings her child to a conference, she knows better than any other person there that this is a BAD move. She is really holding her breath and hoping madly that somehow it will be okay. What she is doing (with trepidation in her heart) is making a bid for her fight to be included. But my pal wouldn't have this. She felt that the mother was making an inappropriate "statement" at her expense. As the conversation continued I realised that the gap in our experience of the every day was so extreme there was no language that could bridge it. Our conversation got really loopy and daft. It was like my script was lifted straight from a soap opera. I'd say things like: "Well probably the woman couldn't afford to pay a baby-sitter or the neighbour who said she'd help couldn't at the last minute, or p'haps the baby was feeling insecure and needed to be with its mother even at an inappropriate place like a conference ... blah blah ..." and my friend would say things like: "That woman was directly involving me in an agenda I did not want to be part of. I came to hear the speakers, not her baby".

Perhaps the tension beneath all of this, is to do with breaking a sacred taboo:

Motherhood = Sacrifice. It would seem that western culture exhorts and needs this idea, but more surprising and distressing is that many of us connive and are complicit with this version of what being a woman (with child) means. All mothers know there are certain aspects of their lives they are going to have to change radically for the health and happiness of their children. However, the eternal (secular) sacrificial mother, eyes lowered as she stares at her babe in arms, is something that I think is very powerfully embedded in the psyche - we all want to be that babe in arms, basking in the undivided attention and unconditional love of our mother.

Finally, I hope to publish at some point, a collection of my Theatre Texts written in the last ten years. I call them Theatre Texts, because they are not plays. At the moment they lie on my shelves, some of them unperformed. They include *The B File* which started its life as a Magdalena project, *Honey Baby 13 Studies in Exile*, which was produced by LaMama Theatre in Melbourne last year, and *Sade's Wife - The Misfortune of Virtue*, a meditation on the life of the Marquise de Sade written for The Women's Playhouse Trust.

I hope some of you will also read my new fiction *Billy and Girl* (published by Bloomsbury, London) which is about a brother and sister who sell their messed up childhood to the American television chat shows. As I speak I have just seen a review of my book in *The Guardian* newspaper. It's an intelligent review, except that the space given to it is a tiny column of about two paragraphs. Next to it is a whole page plus photograph devoted to the subject of the novelist Martin Amis' teeth. Did he have crowns, caps or implants? Time for me to write off and go and chew a lot of candy so as to be sure to get some dental attention for the media to discuss.

DEBORAH LEVY (Britain) is a writer. Her works for theatre include *Pax*, *Heresies*, *Clam*, *The B-File*. Her prose works include *Beautiful Mutants*, *Swallowing Geography*. Other collaborations include film and choreography.