

Jane Buckler

Talking to Myself

*Surely writers have the right to
be the ones that write?
And mostly, I think,
I do it better alone. In the first
instance, that is.
Then comes the open door.
Why do I want this kind
of self-imposed isolation?
Because I feel comfortable
with words.*

At my computer in the morning rain (I always experience weather as if it were directly over me rather than distanced by glass and roof), I blink at the bright screen. I am comfortable here, at my private screening. The American playwright, David Mamet, commented whilst being interviewed on television: "Most people talk to themselves, I just do it professionally."

I have been (writing) for about fifteen years. Closer now than ever to the old-fashioned view: the figure in the attic surrounded by papers. All the years I have gone out and shown myself; the school visits determined to demonstrate that the writer is not a mystical figure. That she lives and breathes and can communicate outside her own home just like everyone else. That she, too, has an ordinary job. Only she doesn't. Not really. This one is a snail. She finds her shell all too inviting.

I spent a number of years "outside" working in an open way with theatre companies. I grew up in the tradition of women finding their voice through all kinds of textual and visual collaboration. In apprenticeship to the spoken word I sat and stood and stretched alongside other practitioners. We made work using text in many different ways, from fragments to monologue, songs to plays. I often wrote "on site" or produced scenes overnight which could be worked the next day. It was a public activity.

Now I find myself retreating. Increasingly wanting to work alone before sharing. Rejecting the old home of the rehearsal room. Telephone calls replacing meetings. Is this the emergence of an essentially retiring nature or am I, indeed, on the listen-out for new messages journeying to me from other routes?

Arthur Mindell talks about the "time-spirit" idea. You can become a vehicle for certain things that need to be said just by opening yourself up and allowing the conversation to take place. Perhaps this is some kind of spiritual highway; the opportunity for things to be talked through you. They might be things that cannot be said somewhere else.

Or is this my millennium excuse for joining "the opposi-



Jane Buckler at Ravenor Primary School preparing *The Boat of a Million Years*

tion". For, to be truthful, the words "collective writing", "shared", "devised" and "oral tradition" now cool my pen. I know I am not what I recently heard described as a "multi-artist". I do not want to direct, perform, sing, design, or make films. I want to write. I want to collaborate, but I want to write. I might seek to change things sometimes: the shape of plays, to reinvent their structures, but I want to write.

Almost suddenly, I realised that story is a good idea. I like characters. Narrative (which used to be a swear word in my dictionary) enables me to tell. I got interested in the work of Joseph Campbell: mythic structures and archetypes. As before,

I like my words stuffed with meaning and layers. I like the crash of a poetic pile-up. But I want it to add up.

Devising is a mixed blessing in my experience. The only place I now really enjoy it is with children. You can find freedom here. With adults, writers are absorbed into a collective artistic process, which can confuse their sense of identity, or they get scrapped altogether in favour of the performers and, for the most part, the director taking responsibility for the text. Sometimes this work is astounding. But the potential for fragmentation is high. Things fall apart, not least the writer. I struggle to get things right by everybody, to honour the multi-vision.

Surely writers have the right to be the ones that write? And mostly, I think, I do it better alone. In the first instance, that is. Then comes the open door. Why do I want this kind of self-imposed isolation? Because I feel comfortable with words. I don't always want to open my mouth. I know what words sound like, feel like, look like. Show me the paper, the screen, open a book. Lock me in. Visit me later, and at intervals. I don't want to do without you but leave me alone. I must be hell to live with.

Does this way of working make me old-fashioned, old school? If I want to talk about dialogue and structure do I have to go to Hollywood? Have I sold out to the tradition of the dominant male writer? Do I think "the play is the thing"? I don't.

I am an individual in a collective process. I write performance text - words to be sung or spoken. Therefore I need others. I am only part of a whole. Yet increasingly I believe a writer needs to learn to be the doctor in her own private practice before looking for fresh diagnosis. Then I welcome the dramaturgs, directors, producers, the interference. Like everyone else, I hate criticism but I understand it to be necessary, the only way forward. Rewriting is writing, as we

all know. But please, let me have a go first.

I run workshops, do residencies, teach writing for performance and community writing. You see, I do want other people to do it too, it is not an exclusive club. In fact, I am evangelical about this. I want text to work and be worked as hard as it can. It doesn't have to do only one thing, the thing that's been expected of it for so long. Project it, shout it, chop it up, tear it apart, pin it to your heart, beat it up, spit it out, wheel it about on objects, mail it out, take it off the street and wrap it up. But let there be room for the you and me who want to make it ours before it leaves home.

Funnily enough, the above might suggest I am prolific, possibly an over writer. A crazy thousands of words a day, shelf full of works writer, can't stop writer. I am not. If anything, I am an underwriter. I used to stare at plays and marvel at the enormous lengths they went to. I'd wish the page numbers up when submitting work. Now I find myself working for opera companies with composers. As a librettist I can be a kind of theatre poet. It suits me. If I need more lines I can repeat myself. In fact it is the rule.

How long can it go on this talking to myself? James Hillman says "talking is a living art" - does this count, this internal dialogue? Where am I heading? What am I tracking? I don't know. I don't know what is

ahead of me on the path. Apache thinking suggests the ground is like a manuscript constantly being rewritten by the movements of feet, wind, rain, leaves. Perhaps this rain, that keeps me in, conversing, is trying to tell me something.

Seek not the ways of the men of old; seek instead what they sought.

Chinese proverb

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