

Laylage Courie

A Gift Passing between Us

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on character in a world
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In America, in 2002, I think
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is valuable.*

Three creatures come to mind as I sit at my desk and think about character. A piece of paper, taped to my wall for some months now, records a few details about the first. It is, initially, a costume; a long indigo cloak stitched with cowry shells, beads and feathers, and a wooden, grass-maned mask. The costume transforms a Cameroon villager (any villager) into a Basinjom-Banyana, translated as the "speaking mask", "the one who never tells lies", and "the one who tells and acts". A villager, on assuming the costume, loses his or her subjective self and criticises the village objectively about disputes, feuds and difficulties. When the ritual is over, the villager removes the costume, and is in no way associated with what has been said. There is no one to blame for speaking truthfully about problems. The problems, once exposed, are put to rest.

I like the Basinjom-Banyana because anyone can become it and speak truthfully from a place that is not the self. A community forms a circle around the character and listens, compelled by the meaning they place on this ritual to hear impartially. The speaker blends back into the circle. The robe and mask are folded and put away.

I met a man who is also a clown. I am fascinated by the life long work of the man on his clown. I attract and assimilate characters over a lifetime; he will spend his whole life with one.

I met the man at a retreat hosted by the North American Cultural Laboratory. At the end of a day's work, each participant presents an idea, song, dance or story that interests them. This man stands up and becomes his clown. The presentation (held within the words "Sometimes, I miss the ocean") is achingly vulnerable. The man's body and face change, as if a light comes on and something on the outside melts, softens. His face is incandescent. When he is finished, the flush, the openness, is still there in his body - he looks out at us, revealed, as if (I think now, remembering) streaming water. For a simple, brief moment (his presentation

is over) he is receptive; there is the possibility of a gift passing between us. I watch (and he sits down, answers a question, and his body hardens again, like wax), and I want to know who is more real?

I have never worked on an extended basis with one group of people. I do not know how the line dividing the woman from her character, the man from his clown (the behaviour on stage from off) fades, when a group knows each other well. Does that line ever disappear? Is it desirable for it to do so? The man who is a clown says that the clown is a magnification of many aspects of himself. Thirty, forty years from now, if work has gone well and hard, how does the man face the clown, the clown the man? Does one, gently, lower his eyes, and step into the other? Do they smile at each other, at arms' length, circling, always circling, with even eyes? Do they embrace each other like brothers or as an old man embraces a child?

Alexandra David-Neel writes of a Tibetan meditation exercise to create a *tulpa* - an exterior being manifested from the meditator's psychic energy. The *tulpa* appears to others as a real creature. David-Neel conjured a jolly, rotund monk who frequented a nearby village.

A *tulpa* will become malicious. It will want its independence. Then the *tulpa* must be destroyed. The meditator may die dissembling her *tulpa*. David-Neel almost did, entering a profound state of exhaustion that lasted several days.

A character is also created within a profound state of concentration. But it dwells within the actor's body, not outside it. Is this riskier? Or does the physical containment, and limitation of the character within the body of the actor enforce a control that the lama - creating outside herself - must struggle to retain?

I think of these three characters as the char-

acter beyond one's self, within one's self, and outside one's self. It is with a strange discomfort and longing that I consider the character beyond one's self. It is created out of a collective need for truth. It rises out of a dam of emotion and tumult, the dangerous detritus of a community. It rises with the energy of water backed up. A fish leaps, arcs, then vanishes. The dam breaks.

I finish this article in August of 2002 after listening to a radio show where the host invites calls with something like: "Everybody seems to know by now, that a US invasion of Iraq is at the very least a strong possibility, I get the sense that it hasn't sunk in yet... the way people are behaving, you might think we were talking about some remote event, a war between two faraway countries that wouldn't have anything to do with us... have we become passive and is that the real legacy of 9/11? People talked about the world changing, most people predicted it would lead to a surge of activism. Why aren't we seeing the kind of impassioned debate that accompanied oral sex during the Clinton administration? Have things got so bad that a kind of fatalistic complacency has set in?" People call in. They say they don't know what to do. They are frustrated and without leadership. They wait for someone to step forward and speak a truth.

I am scheduled to perform - a character outside myself who is dark, barren, erotic, and gleeful. It is the nature of my city that I have scheduled the performance nine months in advance. At the time I perform, you will be reading this. The world *now*, as you read, may be deeply fissured. It may be very much unchanged. It may be warming its hands at the end of winter with a wet breath of dread, or of release. In the *now* of your reading, I may be in the centre of a circle in a theatre, meeting an audience whose need I could not possibly anticipate,



Laylage Courie Photo: Phylliss Dooney

and which I may be unable to answer. I will speak a truth that is my own truth built up from many moments over many months that have funnelled into *now* but what will the truth of the circle be?

It is hard to work slowly on character in a world which changes swiftly and irrevocably. The work must radiate from a depth that allows it to illuminate a great slice of fluctuating time, with equal resonance at each place in the slice. In America, in 2002, I think that the magic, humanness, and reality of the stage is valuable. I work with an aesthetic that this magic should be stripped of the preciousness of material things - this country is saturated with the push to equate possession with meaning. I can create a character whose presence, whose story, is magical, suggestive and dark - as a symbol. I can try to find language that is

potent, imagery that is meaningful, that explodes in the mind. I can work (with language, with voice, with body) to create a character that speaks truthfully from a centre orientated by myself. But I do not know what character (if any character) the circle needs from me.

I wonder if we (I) will be needed. If a truthful thing that speaks clearly will rise and turn out again, waxy, incandescent, and whole.

LAYLAGE COURIE (USA) is a writer and actor working in New York City. Updates on her work, as well as an archive of past performances, is available at www.luminouswork.org