

THEN WHAT HAPPENS?

Storytelling and Adapting for the Theatre

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A FEW NOTES AND A BRIEF GLOSSARY

Then What Happens? is the companion to *Different Every Night*, in which I describe some of my rehearsal processes when working on plays – that is, material written specifically to be performed. This book deals with the performance of narrative material intended to be read or told. With the former, the storytelling is implicit and the characters usually remain within the imaginary worlds of the plays they inhabit. With the latter, the storytelling is self-evident and the actor/characters function both within and without their imagined worlds. To perform this material, actors require additional techniques to those for performing in plays. These particular skills are what, for the most part, this book is about. Of course, the essential techniques of acting – actions, objectives, points of concentration – still apply and underpin all the storytelling techniques. I do refer to them in passing, but anyone interested in a more detailed account of my approach to those fundamentals of acting should take a look at the earlier book.

Plays are written to be performed. Without us, the live audience, their performance remains an impossible object. Their texts all share the same components that identify them as plays, the most obvious being dialogue, people interacting with each other and occasionally with us, supported at times by minimal descriptions of their behaviour and appearance. They are usually concerned with a limited number of characters in a limited number of locations over a limited period of time, for the most part chronological, and are conceived, with rare exceptions, to be performed over an average of say two-and-a-half hours, more or less non-stop, with the audience absorbing whatever it can as the action proceeds. The characters are rarely if ever explained. They reveal themselves through scenes of action that we, the observers, interpret. They are almost never seen from varying viewpoints, although the characters will, of course, talk about each other. Because of the consistency of these ingredients, true from the plays of Aeschylus to whatever contemporary plays are currently on offer, *Different Every Night* can describe a structured process of rehearsal applicable to any play.

Stories, however, apart from all being words on a page or in the mouths and memories of storytellers, have little in common with each other, let alone with plays. Stories that are written down are, unlike plays, intended to be read – and read at the pace of the reader who, unlike the audience at a play, has complete control over the experience, able to re-read, thumb back or flick forward, stop and start at will. Their length and their number of locations and characters are without limit. Their time spans, also without limit, can move freely between past, present and future.

They may exist with or without dialogue, description or commentary and can be told from any or many a point of view. A story may teem with physical action on an epic scale or contain its action within the depths of a character's psyche. Characters may remain enigmatic or be extensively analysed and described. This variation in the contents and structure of stories means that there's no one sequence of rehearsal work that could accommodate them all on their journey to the stage. Each story, whatever its source – novel, epic poem, myth – requires a unique treatment of its own. It is the particular needs of a particular story, the individual dramatic choices it demands, that will light the fuse of your imagination.

Consequently, this book can't and doesn't try to set out a structured sequence of work, but offers some ideas and workshops around the subject, the intention being to open up for consideration the rich possibilities of story-theatre.

In story-theatre four disciplines converge: storytelling, theatrical performance, the adaptation of material from non-dramatic sources, and the development of an ensemble with the necessary skills to fulfil its special demands.

Only actors give life to theatre. This is true whether they're performing plays or telling stories. That's why this book echoes the other in its insistence on the primacy of the actor. To that end, the reader should bear in mind that, as stressed in *Different Every Night*, all rehearsals and performances are kept alive by constant process. That's to say, the work aspires to constant development and never to pre-determined results: to *allow* things to happen rather than to *make* them happen, to discover rather than to know, to become rather than to be.

The book is in two parts. Part One deals with the *What*, Part Two with the *How*.

Part One is in nine sections:

Section One sets out my own experience of story-theatre.

Section Two extols the virtues of storytelling and its difference from playacting.

Section Three describes the optimal physical and spatial conditions for story-theatre.

Section Four details the extensive skills that storytelling demands of performers.

Section Five enumerates the component parts of narrative, together with some principles for transforming a narrative text for reading into a narrative text for performing.

Section Six concentrates on the processes for transforming a narrative text for performing into an actual performance.

Section Seven does some further extolling, this time of the virtues of adaptation.

Section Eight offers some techniques in the process of adaptation.

Section Nine discusses the creation of consistent worlds or realities.

Part Two contains sixty workshops to develop storytelling skills, grouped under fifteen topics.

Most of the workshops contain a considerable number of exercises. All exercises are in boxes.

Matters discussed in *Part One* are cross-referred with their appropriate workshops in *Part Two*. Workshops whose techniques may overlap are also cross-referred.



My experience of adapting and staging non-dramatic fiction is that the two functions form a synergy. At various stages in the process they can alternate, overlap or travel in parallel, but finally they're inseparable aspects of the same process. So whenever I use the word *Adaptation* or any of those *Trans*-words (*-pose*, *-late*, *-mogrify* and the like) I'm referring to the whole journey from page to stage. When I need to refer to them individually, the context should make it clear that I'm doing so.

Actor, *Performer* and *Storyteller* are all-embracing, interchangeable nomenclatures that apply whether an actor/performer/storyteller is narrating or playing a character or in any other way contributing to the performance; the *Storyteller* can act and the *Actor* can tell stories. *Narrator* refers specifically to whoever is actually delivering the narrative, that is to say, literally *telling* the story. When I need to distinguish between *Narrators* and the rest, especially when describing exercises, I refer to *Narrators* as such and the others as the *Group*. Both together I refer to variously as the *Company*, *Ensemble*, *Cast* or *Class*.

Story can refer to any sort of narrative, whether in prose or in verse, from a fable to a novella, from a biography to a devised piece; *Narrative* for the purpose of this book refers to all prose or verse with the exception of dialogue; *Scene* refers to any section of dialogue in a story.

Stage indicates any acting space; *Theatre*, any venue where a performance can take place.

Transition is any change from one state to another; *Transformation* is the nature of the change.

When I use *we*, I am at times identifying myself with the audience and the world at large; at others with the smaller world of theatre practitioners. Whenever I refer to *you*, I'm addressing whoever may be guiding a workshop or rehearsal. When I

identify an individual, should I subsequently need to refer to them again, I'm adopting, as often as I can – at times, I acknowledge defeat – the grammatically incorrect 'they, them, their and theirs' (as I'm doing in this sentence). This is to preserve some euphony while avoiding the politically condemned 'he, him and his', the politically grovelling 'she, her and hers', and the acceptable but cumbersome 'he or she, she or he, her or him, his or hers'...



A Note for Devisers and Improvisers: To illustrate narrative devices, I'm inevitably taking examples from stories that already exist as texts. And this sort of material, mainly from novels, does predominate throughout the book. But the methods described can be intelligently put to use on devised and improvised storytelling. Devised work is usually spared many of the analytic procedures applied to existing texts since an improvised story and its interpretation usually arrive hand in hand; the what and the how tend to be created together. Of course, once a devised piece exists as a text, you can analyse it just like any other type of narrative or play. In fact, this is a useful way to find out with a cool head the subtextual themes and patterns underlying work that has been created in the heat of improvisation. It's also a useful way to ensure that the world that's been devised is coherent and consistent.

Part One

THOUGHTSHOPS FOR STORYTELLING

STORYTELLING v. PLAYACTING

All (well, most) plays tell stories. The fundamental difference between playacting and storytelling is the actor/character's ability, through narrative, to step outside the story being enacted in order to talk about it. This single, simple difference unleashes what seems an unstemable torrent of conventions, many of them highly sophisticated and in need of their own techniques. Of course, there are plays in which characters talk directly to the audience or interrupt the action to comment on it. These instances take the form of soliloquies and asides by characters sharing their thoughts and feelings with us because there's nobody else within the action to whom they dare to or care to unburden themselves. But most of such addresses to the audience function as confessions and confidences rather than narratives. Occasionally in a play – Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* comes to mind – one of the characters will take on the function of a narrator. And in Conor McPherson's *The Weir*, the characters tell each other stories. But they stay firmly in character and within *their* story. In storytelling, the narrator is not necessarily a character involved in the action – or even a character at all – and can address the audience from on or beyond its periphery. But even talking to us *as* a character, a narrator's intention – tendency at very least – is to guide us, if at times unreliably, through the story rather than using us as an emotional dumping ground for such personal problems as whether to be or not.

NARRATIVE FLEXIBILITY

Once a narrator exists, there's the potential for unlimited flexibility in the way a story can be told. Storytelling can set up swiftly and clearly whatever needs to be known. A narrator, without assistance from any change of scenery or Ibsenite exposition, may override those methods of establishing the traditional unities of time, place and action simply by announcing a new scene, introducing a character or filling us in on events prior to those we're about to witness. In most plays, to avoid the falsity of characters telling each other information that they probably know already, the playwright is forced to considerable lengths of ingenuity to disguise such exposition and embed it as naturally as possible within the scene. Narration eliminates the need for what can be dress and presents the material in a direct and distilled state. In fact, narration makes it possible for transitions to occur with the same

The Storyteller's Many Roles

In plays, an actor usually performs a single role or, occasionally, two or three smaller ones. But because stories are not constrained by the limitations of time, space and budget within which most plays are written, their expansive plots can, more often than not, require the actors to play a broad gallery of characters for which the concept of casting becomes meaningless. They cannot rely, should they habitually do so, on certain patterns of performance that over time they've acquired (and now possibly, half-consciously, depend on) to see them through a series of roles in a sequence of plays. Storytelling forces them to break with these performing personae and search within themselves for many selves. Their virtuosity confirms that, latent within every one of us, there exists a universal connection, a protean understanding of others; we all possess something of everyone else, past, present and, at a reasonable guess, to come. Hardly surprising when we're all made of the same stuff. The storytelling actor exemplifies this capacity within us.

The Storyteller's Many Relationships

Storyteller to Audience

The actor's prime relationship is obviously to the audience. Their reception of the story is the reason for the telling. Consequently, an actor's awareness of the audience must exist at all times, not just while narrating to them directly. When storytellers play scenes, they are simply telling a story by other means, and they should sense that they're taking the audience with them into that scene rather than leaving them on hold until they return to their narrating persona. Storytellers have to ensure that the audience is travelling with them on every step of the story's way.

Their direct address must establish a genuine connection with the audience. They have to ensure that the entire audience is contacted, no punters left ignored and disgruntled in the upper circle, resentful of the people in the front stalls clearly having a far better time of it than they are. To talk *to* an audience is more easily said than done. It's not good enough to send lines sailing out into the dark, hoping that they'll land somewhere appropriate; actors have to make sure, simply, clearly, appropriately – neither self-effacingly nor self-promotingly – that their words reach their target. Consequently they need to remain open to possible responses from the audience (smiles, nods of agreement, concerned looks, furrowed brows, tear-filled eyes, even words) and ready, in turn, to respond to these, to allow these reactions to affect the subsequent course of their narrative, so that this give and take flows through the whole performance. Storytelling works in both directions. [*Cross-refer Set 12, Workshops 54-57: Developing Contact with the Audience*]

Part Two

WORKSHOPS FOR STORYTELLING

This first set of five workshops is an introduction to the three basic modes of narrative. Unlike later sets, its individual workshops are devised in a progressive sequence, each one growing out of its predecessor. So I would recommend, initially at least, employing them in this way. Of course, it's perfectly possible to insert any of them as a module into other structures.

WORKSHOP I: ONE STORYTELLER TELLS A STORY

In advance of the first session, ask each of the participants to be prepared to tell a story. It can be from any source, invented or extant. Ideally, it should contain several characters and locations and possibly a journey. It should not last more than ten minutes. For this initiation into storytelling, fables, folk and fairytales, myths and legends can usefully serve the purpose. It's perfectly acceptable to use familiar material. Originality is not the point here. At this stage, storytellers should avoid using first-person narratives. The opening workshop is to introduce the participants to some fundamental requirements for a storyteller/narrator, and also to generate material for the following workshops in this set. These initial workshops deal with both the story and the way it is told.

A Single Actor Tells a Story

For these early sessions, everyone should be seated on the floor with the listeners at a comfortable distance in a semicircle around the storyteller.

1. An actor tells a story.
2. The group comments on (a) how the story was told, and (b) the nature of the story itself. These are some of the areas that might be discussed:
 - a. Did the storyteller make genuine contact with the audience?
[*Cross-refer Set 12, Workshops 54-56: Contact with the Audience*]
Did the storyteller tell the story confidently or apologetically?

TONE: The quality of voice such as warm, cool, immediate, remote, caressing, hard, swooping, monotonic, denasalised, guttural...

TEXTURE: Another slightly more metaphoric way of thinking of vocal quality: gritty, oily, squeaky, creaking, rasping, hissing, chewed...

Volume

There's a tendency to push on the voice in order to talk more loudly. This usually results in a strained flattening out of the voice with a consequent loss of expression. When actors are told they can't be heard, their instinct – and objective – is, unsurprisingly, to speak louder, usually to the detriment of their performance as they substitute this objective for their objective in the scene, losing all contact with their partners as they belt out their lines at the audience. Rather than treating the voice as a projectile to hurl into the auditorium, they should think of widening, broadening and releasing it – opening it up sideways, as it were, in a wide embrace of the audience. Instead of forcing themselves on the audience, they should invite the audience to enfold itself within that vocal embrace.

At the other end of the spectrum, if there's a need to play quietly, it's unwise for actors to whisper. They'll be inaudible and damage their voices into the bargain. Whispering takes the voice off-centre, which limits the breath and strains the throat. They should talk normally but quietly. If the intention is clear and the articulation clean, they *will* be heard.

1. Choose a sentence or reasonably full phrase.
2. Starting quietly, focus about ten metres in front of you and repeat the sentence so that it will be heard adequately at that distance.
3. Gradually widen the release, as, little by little (maybe ten metres at a time), you increase the distance you wish your voice to reach. Always focus precisely on the exact point at which you wish to be heard, but make sure you remain physically on the same spot. Remember: release the words rather than push them.
4. The moment you experience any discomfort or pressure on the voice, go back and re-exercise the previous distance.
5. Then reverse the process, decreasing the volume.
6. Assuming your voice is in healthy working order, your commitment to the intention motivating the text will ensure you're heard.

WORKSHOP 21: RECALLING

This is to explore the experience of the characters looking back on events from some distance of time, possibly re-evaluating themselves and the people they were involved with at the time.

Here is another excerpt from *Bleak House*. It is Esther's birthday. She has just been told by her godmother that her mother was her disgrace and she is her mother's, that she is different from other children and set apart.

I went up to my room, and crept to bed, and laid my doll's cheek against mine wet with tears; and holding that solitary friend upon my bosom, cried myself to sleep. I knew that I had brought no joy, at any time, to anybody's heart, and that I was to no one upon earth what Dolly was to me.

1. The actor relates the above excerpt very much remaining in the present recalling the past in several ways:
 - i. Wanting to share with her hearers the bitterness she feels towards her godmother's treatment of a very young, naive girl.
 - ii. Wanting to express a sympathetic humour towards her former naive and vulnerable self.
 - iii. Wanting to remain as factual and as objective as possible, despite being touched by this childhood memory.
2. The actor tries as many other ways of recalling this excerpt as you find useful.
3. Take some suitable material of your own explore, asking the actors to recall the memories in as many ways as you find useful.

WORKSHOP 60: FRAMING AND LINKING STORIES

If you decide to create a performance from several short stories, the reason you made this particular selection should no doubt influence the way in which you put them together. What is the connection between the stories? Do they have a chronological progression or does each travel further back in time than its predecessor? Are stories encased, one within another, like Russian dolls? Are the stories totally discrete, apart from characters who may appear more than once? Do all the stories explore the same themes? Do they form an argument? Do characters tell each other stories as a form of advice or consolation? How stories are linked, both internally and externally, will be as important as the stories themselves, and strongly influence the nature of the world of the performance. I've already described the way in which we assembled stories in some of our own storytelling projects. [*Cross-refer Section 8: Short Stories*]

Here are a few ideas for structures to link stories:

I. Discrete Stories

I suppose it would be perfectly reasonable to chose a group of stories with nothing in common but your pleasure in them.



Some other connections might be:

A unifying character or a whole community participating in all of them: Sholem Aleichem's Tevye stories; folk tales of tricksters and fools such as, respectively, the French Reynard the Fox and the Polish-Jewish villagers of Chelm; the Compson, Sartoris and Snopes families who inhabit William Faulkner's invented Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi and reappear in many of his novels and stories...

Authorship: stories by Hans Anderson, Guy de Maupassant, Sigmund Freud, M. R. James, Raymond Carver...

Themed authorship: Kipling's *Just So Stories*, Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Aesop's *Fables*...