

THE BREATH OF INSPIRATION

For years I banged my head against the proverbial and sometimes literal brick wall, waiting on inspiration. On the days it didn't visit, I fell into drink, and despair. And, as I had read of suffering for one's art, I foolishly convinced myself this torture was all part of the creative process. I understood only one meaning of inspiration:

INSPIRATION noun.

1. Divine influence, esp. that which is thought to prompt poets.

When it didn't 'prompt' me, I 'died' like an actor on stage who has 'dried'. The problem was that that definition gave me no clue as to how to find my way to the 'divine influence'. The other definition, however, did:

INSPIRATION noun.

1. Drawing in of breath.

Much simpler. In fact, it couldn't be much clearer:

1. Inspiration is that which gives us life itself, that breathes life into us.
2. Without it we are dead. An indispensable human activity.
3. I am not dead. Therefore, I am inspiring.
4. But I am as clearly conscious of the process going on as, normally, I am about my breathing.
5. I simply have to become conscious of what is already going on inside me.

I admit to being slow. It took me six years to understand that I, like everyone else, am already inspiring. I simply needed to become aware of it, and eliminate anything that blocked or limited it.

The writer's block

Inspiration is the intake of breath, not its expiration. But is dependent on it. If we don't breathe out, then no air can come in, and we die. The manner in which we breathe out, the depths to which we clear our lungs, the tensions we impose on our chest and back - all these control whether the inspiration is shallow and restricted or full and rich. It is pointless trying to work on the inspired breath directly - you can't squeeze any more air into the lungs than you have expired. As an actor, attempting to gain 'voice control', I foolishly worked on the intake, trying to choke more down, gasping at the air, until an excellent voice coach explained the misdirection of my efforts. However, we can assist the clearing of the lungs, the expiration, to create the vacuum for inspiration to occur more freely. Stanislavski's and other acting techniques have extended this notion of clearing the ground not only to the body, but to the feelings and thoughts of an actor. It is part of becoming 'receptive', as opposed to 'blocked'. It is attention and focus (rather than tension and discipline). It is also extremely hard work. As a playwright you have to prepare your own arena. Peter Brook calls a similar meeting ground in the theatre

the empty space. Having done this, then you sit back and wait. You can, for the moment, do little else.

In my experience, when it comes, inspiration is often in the shape of a living image, brief, fragile, but itself breathing, and this image is the fusion of both form and content. Prior to this moment, there may have been months of entertaining thoughts on a certain subject, deep research, interviews, essays, but the moment it becomes alive, animated, is when something takes hold and creates an image.

Art is ruled uniquely by the imagination. Images are its only wealth. It does not classify objects, it does not pronounce them real or imaginary, does not qualify them, does not define them; it reels and presents them - nothing more.
(Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*)

Just as we are all inspiring, so are we all image-makers

However, apart from within a few privileged areas, image-making is a much-derided attribute in contemporary society. Every night our dreams are full of images, and they lie there scarcely buried under the surface of our so-called consciousness as we work during the day. But we are told to push them away, not to daydream, not to dwell on things, snap out of it - in short, to pay attention to some other reality dictated by another.

The playwright, as an act of perversity, decides to do the opposite, believing that these images are perhaps not mere distraction, or escapism, but may hold a key to some deeper truth, or simply that they are more fun, more alive, than the specific task in hand.

What are the images a playwright works with?

This is the first paradox of an activity surrounded by paradox. As I've already revealed by my total lack of interest in 'literary style', I am not a writer. I am a playwright. I am not involved in a literary pursuit. I make, I 'wright', not write. For a clear description of the implications of this essential distinction I'd recommend you study John Arden's superb essay on playwrighting in his *Pretend the Pretense* - that alone might save you much confusion. So, like a shipwright, a cartwright, I 'make' plays. And here is another paradox.

Worker's playtime

The word 'wright' carries with it the notion of work, and 'play' is perceived in our society as its opposite. So be it. I work and play at the same time. But so strong is the Calvinist work ethic in us that we often aren't allow ourselves enough space to play. Embarrassed by the childish nature of our activity, we become intent (and intense) on demonstrating our seriousness, and the 'validity' of our noble craft. In doing so, we all too often kill its very strength, we literally throw out the splashing, playing baby and the plastic duck with the bath-water. We end up with earnest, well-covered, extremely meaningful, and totally lifeless plays. The baby or the plastic duck could both have told us there is nothing more boring than earnest,

well-covered, extremely meaningful, and totally lifeless plays. You have to splash a little or there is no point in being in the bath.

So don't forget to play. Don't feel guilty. Have some fun. The work is clearing the ground, the play is - whatever, whoever enters it.

You've paid for your ticket. Now take your seat

But don't expect the mind simply to go blank, any more than the lungs will stop breathing. What happens is that this 'clearing away' reveals deeper desires, and yearnings. It is accompanied by a shift from the desperate desire to control and manipulate, to a point where I slowly become not the active maker of images, but the audience hopefully waiting for 'something to happen', yearning for some as yet unknown image to fulfil some perhaps equally unknown, unarticulated need. I become the best, the most demanding, the most alive audience I can. I won't be fobbed off with a bad game. As images arrive, I reject and accept them just as children take up, transform or drop games as their inner need dictates. Audiences watch and are connected with the plays and games we offer them according to these inner needs. It is this as yet inarticulate and unexpressed desire, however, that shapes the game.

We know that even God could not imagine the redness of a
red Geranium
nor the smell of mignonette
when geraniums were not, and mignonettes neither . . . But
imagine, among the mud and the mastodons
God sighing and yearning with tremendous creative yearning,
in that dark green moss Oh, for some other beauty, some
other beauty
that blossomed at last, red geranium, and mignonette.
(D. H. Lawrence)

Les règles de jeu

God, of course, has rather a lot of resources at his disposal. His inspiration can take practically any form. The point is, it has to take a certain form, it has to breathe life into a certain frame. My experience, both as an ex-literary manager and from workshopping with playwrights both here and abroad, is that most do not pay sufficient attention to the potentials, and distinctions, of the various playwrighting forms themselves. They regard such considerations as restrictive, rather than seeing the apparent rules of a form as capable of offering inspirational ideas. All too often, the inexperienced playwright seems to think a 'divine' idea appears, and then it can simply be translated into whichever form is most available. In my experience, this is the opposite of the truth. The moment of inspiration is when form and content merge. A major part of my work is to consider the medium itself, and a major part of my play is concerned with the medium itself.

As ideas and the first tentative images come to me, I imaginatively explore them via the possibilities of differing media. But, in order to be able to play like this, it's essential I have a strong sense of the way images operate in the different 'play' media

(the theatre itself with a myriad of different presentational forms, film, television, radio) - I move imaginatively around the image as a camera; or relate to it in the specific confines of the theatre audience; I listen to the sounds of it closing off all visual images. Each will reveal a new facet, a new possibility.

It is not that each medium simply offers a different way to say the same thing. Having over the past ten years turned my stage play *Touched*, about women in Nottingham at the end of the Second World War, into a radio play, and now into a script for a television film, I am very conscious of how impossible such a thing is. That is not a disappointment. Each new language offers the possibility to say something different, to reach into areas the other media could not reach (while of course losing what they were strong in). Because of this the work becomes alive again.

Each so-called translation should be a celebration of the new medium

More than half the plays I see in workshops are ideas uncertain of their home, and, as such, often very good ideas fail to inhabit the correct medium to engage its audience. All too often a stage play is really masquerading unhappily as a radio play, the radio play seems to think the viewer can see what is not communicated by language and sound, the television script struggles with the epic sweep of the film, the film is locked in some mid-distance shot as though it were a stage play being seen from the same seat in the centre of the third row back. Such a state of affairs is a failure of the imagination. It is failed image-making. And I suspect one of the reasons for it is a fear about the intricacies of the differing languages themselves.

Don't be afraid

If you look at the various media for the virtues of their image-making process, it can become a liberation to your work/play. You don't need any secret knowledge to discover this. It is, however, of primary importance to experience the medium as one of the audience. This sounds so obvious as to be embarrassing, but if I had a pound for every radio play submitted by people who have spent months writing in and never bothered to listen in to the afternoon play I could retire. The number of sit-coms written by people who have clearly never seen one would take your breath away. So -

Open up. Let us others inspire you. Be willing to learn. If only not to repeat their mistakes. It is a disastrous combination of arrogance and stupidity to think you have nothing to learn from the work of others.

Of course, with television everyone thinks they know it. Haven't we all spent our lives watching it? Couldn't we all do better?

Probably. So what stops us? Well, many feel that, while being expert 'audiences' with stories to tell, there is some arcane technical language - that of the mystery of the cameras - that prevents them from 'writing for the box'. There is no mystery of the camera as far as I'm concerned.

The mystery of the camera revealed

1. It can operate any distance away from its object, as long as the front of it is pointed towards it.
2. It can move towards it/away from it/around it/along with it.
3. It can cut to something else.

To a playwright having a medium like that is totally inspiring. Look over an image you are playing with, with this eye.

And look at the television set itself, from the perspective of seeing its form not as restrictive, but as a liberation.

The television screen was created as a box to contain the image of a human head. This head could educate us with the news, lecture or sermon, or entertain us with a song or a joke, but it would largely talk directly to, or at, us. The head was intended to be perceived as roughly life size from the viewing distance of some six feet away. I've always felt television sets should not be placed on stands (making everybody look like Evil Edna in *Will of the Wisp*) but should rest on the shoulders of a dummy you sat in the armchair in the corner. But the whole head has to be shown. If you use extreme close-ups, sectionalising the face, giant mouths, eyes, something unnerving happens to the viewer in a way that wouldn't in the cinema. Cinema's unnatural size encourages in the viewer a different aesthetic acceptance of an already sectionalised, partial, and enlarged world.

Even with a twenty-six-inch television, the most successful moments are still two people, side by side, talking directly to us (there is simply not enough space to allow them realistically - i.e. at a life-size level - to talk to each other). Note here the distinction between the Two Ronnies comfortably talking to us as comic newsreaders, and the strangely intimate and rather disturbing Smith and Jones whispering to each other in profile.

These heads are the magnetic centre of television: its mainstay is either a face staring out at us, or two faces being pulled closer and closer together. Everything else is a dance around that. This became the inspiration for my recent *Screen Two* film, *Ice Dance*, when I heard Christopher Dean, the Olympic skater, say the world had never seen the major 'transformation' moments in their performance, as these were facial expressions that only the judges could witness (cameras being barred from being placed behind the judges). I wanted to see the moments I was barred from seeing. I wanted the mobility the camera had, to track and follow these dances, to move away from them so the whole pattern could be seen and to cut back to close-up to see the expression of the dancers' faces. It was from this, from images of the two dancers' separate faces, and the magnetic pull to bring those faces together, that the whole piece was shaped. That was the visceral tension in the viewer that I was exploring. It clearly could not have worked half so well on stage, or as a radio piece. Inspired by the potential of the form, I was sustained through the months of research, playmaking and filming.

Exploring the apparently intimate life-size nature of television has always fascinated me, from my first *Play For Today*, *Cries From a Watchtower*, in 1979. There I

wanted to explore the implications of the then little-discussed silicon chip technology on the life of an ordinary man, and I chose a watchmaker. The 'tension' lay between his growing awareness of the enormity of the problem he was encountering, and his diminishing control over the carefully organised components of the mechanical watch. The camera could move from the minutiae of the watch to his face and on to the wider world. But his face, his emotional life, lay at the heart of it. This the television camera can well explore, since television operates, at least semi-consciously, on this line. It can be explored, transformed and challenged. That is one of the interesting games.

Another example is playing with perspectives. After all, the television screen is flat. It simply works hard to deceive us it's otherwise. In 1985 I adapted a stage play of mine, *Kisses on the Bottom*, for BBC2. Its characters were those on seaside postcards - Fat Mum, Henpecked Husband, Honeymoon Couple, Jock the Scot, the Vicar . . . Originally directed for the stage by Alan Ayckbourn, it had never occurred to me it could make a television play. But the director argued it could work simply because it cut across the commonly held misconceptions of television. We would flatten out the image, make the whole piece within the flat, shadowless world of the postcards.

There are many other examples. The key point is, look at the medium, and let its potential inspire you; let it fuse and play with your other concerns and images. Do not write for a medium that does not inspire you. If you do, you will fail to inspire it. And as playwrighting is part of a collective artistic activity involving not only your creativity but that of many others such a state would not augur well for success.

Taken from Philippa Giles and Vicky Licorish (eds.), *Debut on Two: A Guide to Writing for Television*, BBC, 1990.