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African Voices: Who May Speak? Who is Listening? An examination of the process of theatre making and the right to speak in another's voice

My original plan for this presentation was to perform Pamela Gien's award winning play, The Syringa Tree. The play tells the story of six-year old Lizzie Grace, an English South African girl growing up in Johannesburg in the 1960s.

Pamela Gien wrote and originally performed the play, which is unusual though not unheard of. Playwrights are not always the best performers. Creating stories and interpreting them are two different skill sets. I am an actor. I'm in the business of bringing other peoples' words to life. Essentially, I do that by connecting, associating or substituting my own experiences for the experiences I find on the page. If I don't share a common experience with that of the character, I have to research the playwright's world, then apply Stanislavsky's magical "what if?". In the words of the seminal theatre practitioner himself:

... 'if' acts as a lever to lift us out of the world of actuality into the realm of the imagination.

- Constantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 46, Methuen London, 1996

What if I grew up in Johannesburg at the height of apartheid? *What if* I was basically raised by a black woman, while my mother spent much of the day sleeping? Why does she sleep so much? What if she is depressed? Why would she be depressed? Is it in part because her husband is a doctor and hardly ever home? My grandfather was a country doctor in Australia. I vividly remember my grandmother's loneliness, her periodic black rages. That is part of my experience. That, I can play.

So, in essence, that is the process of an actor. Marrying the storyteller's words with researched facts, personal experience and the magical "what if?". Brewing them in the imagination, letting them find a body and a voice. *You*, but not you. *You*, but also someone else: a living, breathing, thinking character who can tell the playwright's story.

Stories are written to be heard. They demand an audience. The word audience derives from the Latin word ***audire***, 'to hear'. I find it interesting that we still use the word when today's audiences take in the vast majority of their information through their eyes. I think a new word needs to be invented for people who sit in front of massive flat screens watching worlds explode, buildings crumble and characters transform from babies to old men in the space of 120 minutes.

The development of computer generated imaging was feared to ring the death knell of the actor in popular culture. Why pay a Hollywood film star millions of dollars, much less cater to his whims and manage his peccadilloes, when a CGI artist can fashion a fascinating performance and store it on a hard drive? There are many examples of how CGI technology has augmented performances, but we still need actors to breathe life into these characters, and they do that with the power of the voice. The character of Gollum in Peter Jackson's filmed version of The Lord of the Rings is chilling to look at, but it's actor Andy Serkis' voice that we remember. No text-to-speech software can translate a line of Shakespeare, Shaw or Fugard and make us laugh, or weep, or shiver. Stories still need to be spoken; to be *voiced*. Perhaps that is why we still use the word *audience*.

So, my original plan for this presentation was to do what I do well, what I have been trained and love to do; perform The Syringa Tree. To present an audience of learned people, passionate about Africa, experts in a vast range of fields, with one English South African woman's experience of growing up in Johannesburg at the height of apartheid.

Let me clarify why this play has been so successful, both on Broadway and around the world. Pamela Gien didn't simply write about the experiences of a six year old white girl. The performer must transform into over twenty different characters over the course of the play: her parents, Eugenie and Isaac Grace; Salamina, her Xhosa nanny who secretly bears a daughter, Moliseng, whom the Graces collude to hide from the authorities. Remember that this is at the height of the pass system, when black people were not allowed to be in white neighbourhoods without a government issued permit. The actor also plays Loeska, Lizzie's next door neighbour, a bossy older girl whose opinions and politics are heavily influenced by those of her father, the Dominee of the local Afrikaans church, another character brought to life in the play. The actor becomes Zephyr, the Dominee's ancient gardener, whose fingers have been cut off in mysterious and sinister circumstances; and Pietros, the Grace's new gardener, who wants to know when the Graces are going to move back to their own country.

In the course of the play, we meet George, Lizzie's grandfather, who is killed during a robbery at the family farm by a Rhodesian freedom fighter. In the aftermath, Salamina and Moliseng flee the Grace home, unable to bear the shame of George's murder at the hands of one of her spiritual brothers. Lizzie and her parents are devastated by their sudden departure. Years later, Lizzie, now a university student, discovers that Moliseng has been killed, shot down by police during a protest march in Soweto. Lizzie flees South Africa, unable to shoulder the burden of so much loss and guilt. It is only years later, after apartheid's dismantling and at the urging of her father, that she returns to South Africa and is reunited with Salamina under the branches of the Syringa tree where she played as a child.

You must not cry for Moliseng, Elizabeth.
Moliseng, she is with us.
When the wind, it blows,
when the leaves grow and fall,
when we walk under the trees, Moliseng, she is with us.
Calling to us in the wind, Elizabeth.
To be proud. To open our hearts with joy.
We are free. We are free.
Moliseng, she is with us forever and ever, Elisabeth.
Forever and ever.

- Pamela Gien, *The Syringa Tree*, p.82, Dramatists Play Services, 2002

It is an amazing story, and an incredible acting challenge: almost two hours alone on stage, with no props and only a simple rope swing as a set. It is one person's story, but it is also the story of South Africa, told through many voices. Audiences respond to the tale regardless of their cultural background or political persuasion because it touches on issues we all understand: family, home, loss, despair, forgiveness, and acceptance.

So that was my plan.

And then I discovered that I couldn't get the rights to the play.

Having learned the entire, epic piece, invested weeks of research, asked my magical "what if?", and brought my interpretation of these words to life, I was informed by the playwright's Sydney representative (in no uncertain terms), that I didn't have the right to tell this story. I inquired about the nature of the restriction, and was emailed a directive to drop it. I requested the playwright's contact details so I could explain the nature of the conference to her personally, and was again refused any information. Finally, through a series of friends and acquaintances that by degrees knew Ms Gien, I was sent an extract of an email explaining that until she has performed the play in Australia herself, her New York producer has placed a restriction on the piece whereby all professional and amateur stage rights are strictly reserved. Once she has performed the piece in this region, the restriction may be lifted.

While I entirely accept that artists must protect their intellectual property and that the playwright is absolutely entitled to earn as much financial reward and recognition for her creation as she so richly deserves, I cannot deny my profound disappointment at being denied the right to speak, to share these characters with you today.

I could break the rules. I could do it for you right now. It's all right here, inside my head. No one can stop me from learning the lines, from breathing life into the characters. I could tell you the story in secret, and I guarantee you would laugh, and you would cry. But there is a rule that has been made that means, by the letter of the law, I don't have the right to speak those words, for money or for love, unless I am given permission by the playwright first. But no one will give me her address. All I can do is contact her via her agent, who has complete authority to pass on my proposal or dispose of it. Furthermore, I only have his word that he will get in touch with her.

Coming from a white, middle-class, Canadian/Australian background, I must admit I'm not very used to being told that I don't have the right to do something. The sense of impotence and heartbreak I experienced after so lovingly dedicating myself to bringing this story to life quite simply left me speechless.

During the rehearsal process, which I had undertaken before learning of the rights restrictions, I had periodically struggled with the question of whether I had the moral 'right' to speak in the voices of Salamina, Moliseng, Pietros and Zephyr. Is it appropriate for a white person, a Canadian who has never even been to South Africa, to speak in the voice of a Zulu woman, to imagine "what if" I were a Xhosa man? I did as much research as I could, interviewing South Africans from many backgrounds, studying their accents, exploring the literature, music, history and politics of the country. I eventually did travel to South Africa and gathered a wealth of additional information. I pride myself on researching every character I play diligently, but the thought of presenting something inauthentic and half-baked to an audience of African experts quite frankly terrified me. But that is the actor's job. As Harper Lee writes in her classic examination of race in America, "To Kill a Mockingbird:

'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it'.

Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird, p.33 Mandarin, 1989

What right do I have to imagine the experience of a Xhosa woman during apartheid? I have no right. But I have the opportunity to share a story which reveals something of her experience, to connect with an audience about her plight, her joys, and her humanity.

I don't wish to undermine the playwright's potential success in Australia. But until she premieres the play in this country, I cannot legally perform it either. If she chooses to never perform it here, those characters' voices will never be heard. And I think they should be.

Through this experience of being denied the right to do something I love, something I believe is important and good, I get a glimmer, just a glimmer, of what it must mean to be disenfranchised. It adds something to the magic of "what if". What if I wasn't allowed to walk through certain neighbourhoods at night? What if I had to keep my child a secret? What if I was denied the education I hungered after? This is what I have learned: being denied rights is humiliating. It makes you angry. It makes you want your voice to be heard. That, I can play.

I hope that one day, Pamela Gien will be given the opportunity to hear my story, and give me the opportunity of telling hers.

Thank you.