

The Drama of Decisions - a workshop.

Watford Writers - Monday, 31st July 2023.

Based on Chris McDermott's M.St. *Writing for Performance*
dissertation at Wolfson College, the University of Cambridge.

Aims of the session

- (i) To introduce the group to some of the thinking behind the construction of Chris' Interactive Theatre play, *Duplicity*.
- (ii) to locate these ideas in a wider dramatic, educational and social context.
- (iii) to work with fellow-writers to develop their thinking and expertise in relation to the writing of plays, with specific focus on an individual scene which might provoke the audience into considerations relating to the decisions individual characters have to make.

Structure - *Duplicity* and the concept of Interactive Theatre.

- Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre in which the audience could take on parts in a play, thus becoming 'spectactors'. This empowerment of the audience is articulated in Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Boal believed that theatre could be used as a means of transforming society.
- The *Interactive Theatre* model adopted for *Duplicity* involves the empowerment of the audience, but in a far more restricted way. The audience interview the characters and decide which route the protagonist should take. The three possible *denouements* have been scripted beforehand.

The Structure of the *Interactive Theatre* model used for *Duplicity*.

STAGE	PROCESS
1	The situation in the play is summarised by Janet, a character who 'breaks the fourth wall'.
2	The audience interviews the individual characters.
3	The audience discusses, possibly after having completed a form, in the case of students. (The Collaborative Model) (N.B. In The Individual Model, discussion can be omitted, or votes can be cast individually, rather than as a group, following discussion).
4	The audience votes.
5	The votes are counted and the relevant option is enacted, with the possibility of the outcomes of those options not enacted, being explained to the audience.

Duplicity - who comprise *The Dramatis Personae*?

- **Karen**, a woman, late 30s - married to Dave.
- **Ruth**, a woman, early 40s - Karen's older sister and an ardent feminist.
- **Dave**, a man, early 40s - Karen's husband, with a history of having been a soldier in Afghanistan.
- **Sean**, a man, early 40s - a friend of Dave's from his army days.
- **Janet**, woman, late 40s – a counsellor, who steps out of her role to 'break the fourth wall' and speak directly to the audience.

Conflict - dramatic tension and reality.

- In *Duplicity* there is the central conflict between the coercively controlling Dave and the conservative and controlled Karen. There are other tensions and conflicts in the play, but this is the one which is central, at least initially.
- Now, think about your own experience, the experiences of people you have known or fictitious factual conflicts you have heard of, or seen, in the media. Start to develop an imagined conflict of your own, which involves two characters in one scene. Will there be a protagonist and an antagonist?
- Before you embark on this, consider the ideas on the next three slides.

(i) Potential causes of conflict - please feel free to add to the list.

- Differing values and beliefs
- Control issues
- Mutually exclusive interests
- Rivalry
- Misunderstandings
- Jealousy
- Differing expectations of roles and cultural norms

(ii) What is the relationship between the two characters? (Some examples are below).

- They are a young couple, dating for the first time.
- They are an established couple, possibly with children.
- They are work colleagues, operating at the same hierarchical level.
- They are work colleagues with an hierarchical relationship i.e. one is the boss and the other an employee.
- They are two people who are in competition for the affections of the same woman/man.
- They are two people with different political views.

Setting the scene -time to reflect and share with a partner.

- Having reflected on the potential causes of the conflict between the two characters and their relationship, place their conflicted conversation, or dispute, in a setting. How will the audience understand the setting and the nature of the relationship without the script making this explicit i.e. your aim is to 'show not tell'?
- Now take some time (5 minutes) to sketch out the setting and the conflict, so that the nature of the relationship between the two is clear.
- Having established the broad outline of the conflict, share your ideas with someone else, so that you each/all seek to develop the other's work, bearing in mind that the subtle art of questioning (using 'closed' and 'open' questions), can be the best way of developing the other person's thinking.

‘Think, pair, share’ - now share your ideas with the whole group so that you tap into the group’s ‘collective intelligence’.

Describe the following:

- (i) The two characters and the nature of their relationship.
- (ii) The setting.
- (iii) The nature of the conflict.

Returning to *Duplicity* - Coercive control and Symbolic Violence

- Evan Stark's book 'Coercive Control. How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life' asserts that: 'Domestic violence' is neither primarily domestic nor necessarily violent, but a pattern of controlling behaviours that is more akin to terrorism and hostage-taking. Drawing on court records, interviews, and FBI statistics, Stark details coercive strategies that men use to deny women their very personhood.' [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk).
- Thapar-Bjorket, S., Samelius L., & Sanhera, G.S. (2016, p.148), assert: 'Symbolic violence is less a product of direct coercion, and more a product of when those who are dominated stop questioning existing power relations, as they perceive the world and the state of affairs in a social activity as natural, a given and unchangeable.'

Duplicity's dramatic predecessors with a similar theme i.e. the oppression of women.

- Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in which Nora is controlled by her husband, Torvald Helmer, who refers to his wife as his 'little spendthrift (who has) been wasting money again'.
- In Patrick Hamilton's *Gaslight* Jack lies to Bella as a means of controlling her, so that she becomes very defensive, protesting to Jack that 'before God I never lie to you knowingly'. Her self-esteem is brought so low that she says she is 'going out of her mind'.
- In J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*. Eva Smith, a young, disempowered woman who feels abandoned by society, takes her own life. This is in the context of a society in which women are viewed as objects of sexual gratification, especially by privileged males.

Duplicity: the coercive control of Karen by Dave and the seeking of sympathy and support.

- **Dave towards Karen:** financial control - Dave tells his friend, Sean, that Karen ‘seems to think it’s okay to waste our money on studying’.
- **Dave towards Karen:** hiding items and lying - Dave hides Karen’s phone and accuses her of having forgotten that she had given him Ruth’s (Karen’s sister) phone number.
- **Karen towards herself (Self-repression, in Boal’s terms)** Karen’s conservative view of the expectations of her religion - ‘By my parents and by God. It’s not right to throw away centuries of values, of doing what is right, just because some people, some women, have said that times have changed. People are people, whatever fashions come and go. Isn’t that right?’
- **Dave supporting himself:** Dave attempts to excuse his behaviour, either by taking ‘the moral high ground’ or taking on the role of the potential victim: ‘(Men just don’t know who we’re supposed to be any more.’ Dave tells Ruth that he ‘hated (his) childhood’ and tells his friend, Sean, a fellow soldier in Afghanistan, ‘...how tough it was when we came home’ (from the war).
- **In Dave’s case, we might ask ourselves the question ‘Does he really believe what he is saying or is he, consciously or unconsciously, involved in manipulation?’**

Duplicity: character motive and honesty.

- The concept of 'the iceberg'. How far is a character conscious of why she/he is doing something? Are a character's statements 'revelation' or 'manipulation'?
- In *Duplicity*, Ruth sees Dave, ostensibly to gain information so that Karen can take legal action against Dave, but she appears to flirt with him. The question for the audience is whether she is doing this to gain evidence for Karen or whether, as a woman who had a teenage relationship with Dave, she is genuinely flirting.
- At one point Ruth records Dave saying that, following his time in Afghanistan, he met up with another woman who 'helped (him) to lose weight.' Ruth plays this recording to Karen, but edits out Dave's comment that he was 'only winding you (i.e. Ruth) up'. The question for the audience relates to Ruth's motive for doing this; is she supporting her sister, Karen, or is she following her own interests?

Returning to your outline conflicts and the concept of 'Think, Pair, Share'.

- You have created a setting in which two characters have a relationship of some description, which brings them towards conflict.
 - (i) Building on the work you have already done, consider the motivations of the two characters, their honesty with themselves and their honesty with each other.
 - (ii) How far will your dialogue be explicit and how far will the meaning and motivation be 'under the surface' (the concept of 'the iceberg') i.e. 'implicit' rather than 'explicit'?
- First spend some time reflecting on the two questions above, before sharing with someone else and then being prepared to share with the whole group.

Duplicity - (i) important concepts - Situational Ethics.

- The issue of character behaviour raises the concept of ‘situational ethics’ (Kalaš, Andrej & Škvrnda, František, 2019). Situational ethics judges an action, not only by absolute standards, but by locating that action within a context. Karen has had to lie to Dave when she explains why she has been out shopping, asserting that it was her “top priority for the day’ to buy his Christmas present’ (Scene 1). Her action in lying is morally acceptable because she is forced by her coercively controlling husband to lie in order to protect herself. Do you agree?

Situational ethics: the poem on the theme of 'A Grand day Out' (first two verses)

Dark, dank, alone; convicted by a liar,
I didn't do it.

Sitting in a prison cell, lost all desire,
I didn't do it.

*Then police they came, a warrant for my arrest,
I didn't do it.*

*Bundled in a police car, was not really dressed.
I didn't do it.*

Situational ethics: the poem on the theme of 'A Grand day Out' (last two verses)

This time he pushed me round the room,
I didn't do it.
Laughing at me I had to fume.
I didn't do it.

*I had to stop him, that I knew
I didn't do it.
I struck him till the blood did spew
This time I did it. And I was right to do so.*

Duplicity - (ii) - important concepts- Critical Thinking.

- In my analysis of my own play, *Duplicity*, it was placed in the category of 'Discursive Values' rather than 'Explicit Values'. This does not imply less strongly-held personal views by the author, but recognises a difference in dramatic format. The structure of the play adopts a '**critical thinking**' approach, asking the audience to question and discuss, rather than a didactic approach, which seeks to instruct or persuade. In doing this, *Duplicity* investigates the subtleties of human interactions and behaviours, aiming to avoid a relatively simplistic notion of 'thoroughly good' characters and 'thoroughly bad' characters. There is an attempt to recognise the importance of identity and inequality, whilst avoiding character analysis purely in terms of 'identity politics'.

Duplicity - (iii) important concepts - Decision-making theory.

- The play's original title, *Time to Decide*, was a reference to both the decisions the characters, particularly Karen, have to make, as well as the structure, which gives agency to the audience in deciding the outcome. Structuring the play in this way presents the audience with the dilemma that has been presented to Karen. This places the issue, in philosophical terms, in the sphere of **decision-making theory** (Gupta, 2018; Egan, 2007). A member of the audience will take a view, based on how far they allow idealism to dictate and to the extent to which this idealism is compromised by political, situational and pragmatic realities. In a world where idealism wins over pragmatism (notwithstanding Karen's conservative views), Karen might leave Dave, at least for a temporary period, if not permanently. However, other considerations might dissuade her from doing this.

Duplicity - important concepts - Decision-making theory. The three options available to Karen, the protagonist.

- Karen's first option will mean that she should be bold, take matters into her own hands, confront Dave, and tell him that she's leaving.
- Karen's second option is to continue with life as it is, seeking to accept that life, for the benefit of her children, cloaking herself and themselves in the veneer of respectability.
- Karen's third option is to leave Dave, for a temporary period at least, to give herself the chance to find her true self, her freedom and what she really wants from life, before making a final decision.
- *How will the decision that Karen makes reflect her 'character arc'?*

The Drama of Decisions - take one of your two characters and outline what their three options might be.

Spend some time reflecting on the three options, and then discuss these options with someone else. In doing this, take into account the following:

- (i) This is about drama, and not, primarily, about reality.
- (ii) People make decisions and respond for a variety of reasons, including visceral reactions, rather than a calmer, more rational, approach.
- (iii) How the interlocutor might respond, upon learning of the decision made by your protagonist/the other person.

In mapping out the above, consider the purpose of your drama: is it didactic or discursive or does it have another purpose e.g. pure entertainment? What type of drama are you constructing? Is it, for example, serious, a thriller, or even a comedy?

What have we concluded? Sharing our ideas as a group.

- Share the ideas you have discussed with the person/people you have been working with re: the decision your protagonist/one of your characters has made and the type of play you have embarked on.
- Do you think your ideas could be expanded beyond one scene into, for example, a ten-minute, or even a full-length, play?
- What have you reflected about yourself as a writer and what, if anything, do you know now that you did not know before?

Recapping 10 thoughts and concepts.

- 1. Forum Theatre and Interactive Theatre.
- 2. Drama vs Reality.
- 3. The power of questions: 'Open questions' vs. 'Closed questions'.
- 4. Coercive Control and Symbolic Violence.
- 5. The Iceberg - in relation to the lack of explicitness of the script.
- 6. Character honesty and motivation; 'character arcs'.
- 7. The 'Think, Pair, Share' model.
- 8. Situational ethics.
- 9. Critical thinking.
- 10. Decision-making theory.

Thank you all!