

VOICING PAIN AND SUFFERING
PURE RESEARCH REPORT BY MARY WALSH

A report on a workshop conducted under the auspices of Nightswimming's Pure Research program, in association with the University of Toronto's Graduate Centre for Study of Drama. Conducted at the Centre's Glen Morris Studio Theatre, in Toronto, October 22-24, 2010.

My purpose in setting up this workshop was to explore a method to unfetter language – free it from the restraints that enslave it and make language nothing but a workhorse in the service of the other arts. I wanted to find out if words could...as Francis Bacon's paintings are said to do...if words on a stage could stab people in the eye...stab people in the soul...call forth real feeling...tear down that wall that written words so often put up.

So I brought together a dazzling team of theatre artists. Sean McCann, out of Great Britain, is a word genius...a bardic improviser...he has a magical gift...a facility with words that is so far past the norm one would be tempted to call it mythic. Susan Kent is profoundly gifted as an actor, writer and performer, and she brought all these gifts to the Glen Morris Studio (University of Toronto). Lois Brown brought her depth of experience, her genius with interpretation and the emotional clarity she, through her magical direction, always brings to the stage.

So with Sean's mythic brilliance, Susan's profound gift, and Lois' genius, we set out to translate the mess...the seething mound...the roiling pile of strong emotion...that is always brought forth from the viewing of a Francis Bacon painting...and transform all that beautiful terrible confusion into words and yet save those deeply emotional words from falling into the cheap and nasty territory of melodrama and soap opera.

As an actor, writer, director, and producer working in film, television and theatre, I have often found myself caught in the chasm that yawns between our oral Newfoundland culture and the written word of the larger culture, between feeling the emotion and expressing it with the written word.

The written word often distances you from the immediate experience that improvisation and the spoken word can readily provide.

Over three days, using three key paintings by Bacon, we embodied in words the images (through extended improvisations); we stayed tightly tied to the emotional life of the painting we were exploring. We projected a slide of the painting on the back wall and we worked in front of the image. The paintings were *Head IV, Study After Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, and *Three Figures at the Base of the Crucifixion*.

We also used text from Joyce's *The Dubliners*. We wanted to explore how Joyce had formed these sentences, these paragraphs, particularly the last two paragraphs of his brilliant short story *The Dead*, how he had made them so evocative, so emotionally overwhelming as to be almost like a piece of music, not tied to experience, not tied to story, just tied to pure emotion. We

worked with this piece of text every day and never failed to be deeply moved by it. We discovered that indeed Joyce had composed words in an intensely musical way and their repetition, dissonance and rhythm all added to their emotional impact. We tried to use these techniques in our own interpretations of Bacon's work. Of course using the words and trying to discover the technique of the man who changed the face of 20th Century literature and who struggled mightily to free words from their workaday shackles was immensely enlightening and uplifting.

Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

- James Joyce *The Dead*

The *Pure Research* workshop revealed to me that text can indeed be made to serve us better, that it can provide a channel to the open beating heart of our deep emotional lives. Like Francis Bacon, I have always believed in the lucky accident and have tried, in my work, to create an environment that encourages that accident to take place. But for many years I believed we could only, with the accident, access 'accidental' emotional depths, usually through comedy, sometimes even through slapstick. In the three-day workshop I learned that I can more directly address deep and roiling emotional truths...that the chaotic atmosphere, of the lucky accident, can, and indeed does, help the raw, unfettered truth to emerge.

We asked the question: "Where does the story stand in all of this?" and we found that sometimes the story cheapens the emotional impact because we have already heard the story...we know the story, the story has already been told, and sometimes the words have to rise above the story to tell the real emotional story of the story.

Working with Francis Bacon's work was such a gift. At first glance so shocking, so repellent, and yet when we spent hours and days with the work we learned so much, so much open-heartedness, so much compassion. Bacon seems to say that we are all utterly alone and yet a part of everybody. I was blown away by the gentleness of James Joyce, by the fierce rigor of Francis Bacon, and my work, since the *Pure Research* experience, has paralleled and is informed by all that we did in those extraordinary three days.

I have been using this newfound ability to access more directly emotion in my upcoming show entitled *Dancing With Rage*. DWR will be a comedy, for as someone said, you have to make them laugh or else they'll kill you, but I now will be able to access more directly the joy, the anger, the sadness, the fear, the guilt, the pride, the jealousy, the anxiety, the shame, the love, happiness and hope, which of course have been the engines that have always driven my work, but which have remained for so many years subterranean and hidden and only able to be accessed obliquely.

I feel a great sense of freedom and an immense rush of creative energy as a result of the workshop and feel that without Nightswimming and the always-inspired assistance of Brian Quirt I would not have been able to arrive on this happy shore.

Mary Walsh is one of Canada's leading performing artists, with acclaimed credits as an actor (on stage, screen and television), writer, and director. She lives in St. John's, Newfoundland.

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