

Mira Rafalowicz - Theatre

people ask me what I do in the theatre.

this is a selection from my list of answers:

an internal critic

an intimate participant

an outspoken audiencemember

a collaborator

an extra eye

I work in dialogue with the director and the writer(s), if there are any.

~~or, if there are no writers, the material.~~

I help asking questions and finding doubts.

the questions are essential, answers and solutions

are part of the end of a process. we don't always find them.

~~I help finding structure~~

I try to ^{help} guard those basic questions as the work develops.

those questions become part of a vocabulary of work.

I keep the whole in mind - an overall structure,

which frees others in the process to lose themselves

in details.

I give my opinion about just about everything.

~~I am the most opinionated person in the theatre.~~

People either listen to my advice, my opinions,

or they don't.

I talk endlessly. with the director, with writer(s),

with some actors who find me useful.

I talk after working hours. ~~the most inspired ideas~~

~~come out of me xxxxxx.~~

what wonderful work for someone who likes to talk a lot.

usually, hopefully I am part of the process from

beginning till end - from the earlier stages of thinking

till the last day of performance.

what I do changes. it is different in different stages of the work.
 it is ~~different~~ different in working on known material
 or in starting a piece from scratch.
 what I do is fluid
 and, as I am writing this I realize,
 hard to describe.

In the traditional theatre dramaturgs read and select
 plays, ~~choose~~ choose the repertoire of an existing company,
 sometimes translate plays, write programnotes,
 give historical backgrounds and literary explanations
 of plays and write theoretical articles about the theatre.

I have done several of those things too.
 I have translated plays (from English ~~xxx~~ and French
 into Dutch, from Yiddish into English), I have
 adapted plays with different friends/directors,
 I have ~~also~~ written ~~and~~ programnotes.

But I have mainly worked in theatre and with people
 who believe in and thrive on collaboration and
 dialogue, a theatre in which functions merge and
 overlap in the earlier stages of work.

"I" and "we" - a note on collaboration.

as I am trying to define my work, label it,
 isolate it from its context, I am discovering
 how difficult it is to use "I".

~~so I use "we".~~ ~~Not because~~ Ideally in the first and basic stage of the work, there is a meeting of minds, an openness to each others concerns and ways of thinking, a merging of ideas..

In ~~this~~ the kind of collaborative work I'm trying to describe, a context of thinking-working is established, a fruitful ground from which ideas sprout. ~~to later trace the origin of an idea might be an interesting task for academics.~~

I will use "we".

I tried to define myself by absence.
would the endresult have been different without me?
yes.
how?
I don't know .
but yes different.

another note:
~~the equation of~~ ^{IS NOT TO BE CONFUSED} collaboration with equal input or democratic ~~voting~~ procedures, ~~is incorrect too.~~
In reality some people's input is more inspired and inspiring.. often actors are on different levels of acting-experience and ~~x~~ consciousness. ~~(Once we start molding a work, decisions are not made by democratic voting procedures, but finally by those who have taken the responsibility to watch rather than act. But those decisions too are taken with enough openness to the actors' feelings and opinions.)~~

As a dramaturg I try to give ^{shape to} the process of working ~~stage~~, which might be described in these stages:

the different stages of work- the changing questions.

stage 1:

we define the area of exploration.

we try to find the questions we will concern ourselves with and open them up.

questions:

what has value for us to attempt to express,
personally, theatrically, socially, politically?
what are we attempting to explore and express with
this work?

we ~~don't~~ try to find solutions, answers,
but we promote a dialogue, a consciousness about
these questions.

at this stage the different labeled functions
in the work merge and overlap. actors, director,
writer(s), invited guests, dramaturg - all
contribute according to their own ability and skill.
the dramaturg contributes to the texture of thought.

together with the questions, we start to establish
a vocabulary, a code, a common work-history.
a cross-current of work is going on between writers,
actors, director, dramaturg, through improvisation,
dividing of exercises and through dialogue.

stage 2.:

we develop and shape material.

~~through constant dialogue with everyone working on the material~~

we ~~now~~ develop criteria for making choices.

the questions become more focused:

what is transmitted, what is evoked?

what can be repeated?~~everythingxxxxxxx~~

everything is still fluid in this stage of the work.

everything still seems to be possible, but it isn't.

this stage is about necessary limitation, about finding

a focus, a direction. ~~it's also about the loss of~~ **THERE ARE NO LONGER**

unlimited possibilities.

some ideas sound wonderful, but when they are brought up and tried out, nothing happens.

does the idea stink?

maybe the writer is not inventive enough

or do the limitations of the actors/creators stop

the idea from growing?

some ideas just dry up, we have to give them up.

some ideas create a wonderful initial excitement,

but the improvisation could never be repeated

and nobody can find the impulse ~~back~~ again.

the idea has to be dropped.

~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~

some ideas are wonderful and exciting, the work coming out of them is wonderful and exciting, but it all turns out to belong to a different piece. It's hard to give those up.

It will ~~be used~~ to a different piece

~~xxxxxxxstagexxxxstartxeditingxxshapingx~~

In this stage some of the different functions re-emerge.

the actor, whether ^{OR NOT} he is working on material s/he has created, needs feedback.

the differentiation between those who ~~do~~ act and have to repeat ^{THE CHOSEN ACTIONS} and those who ~~watch~~ shape THE MATERIAL ~~and question~~ becomes clearer.

~~the writer needs feedback, the actors, the director, the dramaturg.~~

in this stage we start eliminating, choosing, cutting. trying out sequences, finding a beginning structure.

~~xxxxxx~~

ex.: when we were working on Nightwalk Joseph Chaikin and I once drove around in circles ~~in a rented car~~ for 2 days, trying to figure out a sequence.

when we worked on the Dybbuk we went to the beach with 4 of the actors (people whose opinions we learned to respect) and figured out a shape of ~~the~~ Act II, the wedding.

~~if I would have had to do that by myself, alone in my room, I would have struggles much harder.~~ we later changed many things, but ^{WE MAINTAINED THE} basic structure found ~~on~~ that day on the beach, ~~worked~~.

in this stage too, we ask the actors to tell the story of the ^{UNFORMED} piece.

very often the ~~is~~ ^{IS NOT FORMED} story ^{HAS TO BE} yet, so it ~~is~~ invented on the spot, improvised. and we learn from those stories, ab out what is alive, wha t is important, w hat we miss,
~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~

~~when ~~XXXXXX~~ ~~and~~ 3 of the actors (Marcia, Bruce, Cory) and Joe told the story of the Dybbuk~~

ex:

when I first translated the Dybbuk from the original Yiddish, I translated most of the material tha t I thought we might use, very closely to the original Yiddish.

Anski's Dybbuk opens with a number of man who hang out in the synagogue and tell sompetitive stories about miracle-rabbis. Since these specific stories were not interesting, we decided to look for other Chassidic stories that meant something to us. We found a few.

However, ~~xxxx~~ when 3 of the actors (^{MARCIA JEAN KURTZ, BRUCE MEYERS, COREY FISCHER} ~~Marcia, Bruce and Corey~~) and the director (Joseph Chaikin) started telling and sometimes acting the ~~diffxxxx~~ story of the play, they k consistently forgot those opening-stories. We decided to cut them and felt relieved.

stage 3.:

in this stage the piece is starting to emerge,
it is finding its shape.

at this stage we can still change things, cut scenes
and speeches, change the sequence, add a scene here
and there, but we are losing control, power.

by this time none of us participant unlookers
is 'objective'. we have to recognize the limitation
of our perceptions. We are too involved.

our questions change. we cannot ask those questions
among ourselves any longer, we need 'real' outsiders
~~xxxxxx~~ and ask them questions.

at this stage we invite ~~friends~~ friends, friendly outsiders,
our first, still safe, audiences.
safe, because we are also vulnerable. the wrong thing
said to ^{ANY OF US} ~~an actor~~ at the wrong time can close possibilities .

we now ask:

what does the piece actually express?
what do you, audience, outsiders perceive or understand?
is anything of what we thought, wanted, planned, tried
to express ?

~~integrate participants~~
(DIRECTOR, WRITER, DRAMATURGE)

at this stage we, the non-actors, have to make a difficult re-adjustment.

~~from initial participants~~

we have to re-create distance, to re-see, re-examine; we have to listen to outsiders' comments, judgements, criticism.

we have to figure out what is ^{REALLY} there, ~~what is~~ ^{OR} not there. rather than wish it were there. we have to give up ideas that don't work, even if we still have some hope that they might work.

but we also have to evaluate other people's comments, pick out the perceptions that are valuable to the intentions of the work, screen them, use them carefully. and especially: ^(WE HAVE TO TRY TO) stay open. ~~not biased and defensive~~

~~[in this stage the piece develops, it is in the process of finding its own life.]~~

ex.

the first time we invited friends and related people to see Nightwalk, the piece lasted 2 days. The piece that was finally called Nightwalk ~~lasted~~ was ~~1 hour~~ and ~~10 minutes~~ ~~to~~ 70 minutes.

and somewhat later, when the ~~the~~ piece had unmistakably found its own life, we found that the creature (Tina Shepard) was seen as an ideal message, the happy savage.

stage 4:

the performance has found its independent life.

at this stage we have to find even more distance,
painful separation.

we have to find out what this creation has become.

this is the end of a process, a time for re-evaluation.

in this late stage, details can be changed,
small changes can be made.

the questions now become questions about
repetition, about how to keep a piece alive,
about maintaining ~~it~~ or deepening intentions.

this is the ~~point~~ point at which we have to
let go, accept the limitations of the work done,
appreciate and stimulate the actors in what
remains interesting and strong. we have to
become a supportive eye and give the piece over
to the actors.

ex.

when we started working on the Dybbuk we hit
on many of the things we have rejected in our relationship
to being Jewish. At an early stage of the work we thought
that we would offend many Jews with our version of the play.
but looking at it later, when the play was living its
own life, testing it with many different audiences, ~~the~~
it was clear that the play had not become offensive.
on the contrary, what showed was our love, concern, tenderness:
(~~our loving concern~~) for THAT WORLD.

about dramaturgs and critics:

the ~~was~~ fluid function I have been trying to describe is little known in this country.

In the commercial theatre, the producer serves as dramaturg. most producers have invested financial interest in a production, so theatre becomes merchandise. the basic questions asked are related to consumption. what will make more people want to ~~consumption~~ buy tickets.

the producer is the artists employer. the artists ~~in the~~ working in the theatre are economically dependend on the producer. So the artist has to serve the taste of the producer (no matter what his taste). the producer ^{TRIED} serves the public, s/he ~~stands between~~ is an intermediary between the public and the artists, ~~s/he protects the public against the artists.~~

the reviewer comes at the end of a process. s/he comes to see a product. s/he sits there, ~~watching~~ thinking about the article s/he has to write (often the same night) formulating sentences and opinions. The critic's mental pre-occupation ^{MAY} limits his/her seeing.

the reviewer is invited by the producer to give a report on the product, a consumer report, an advice to the public about buying tickes.

BUT VERY SELDOM

ideally the function of the critic and the dramaturg overlap. a good critic can help define the limitations, gaps, flaws of a work and help ~~create~~ ^{CREATE} ways of thinking ~~that~~ that are useful ~~to improve a work~~. ^{TO IMPROVE A WORK.}

mainly reviewers have no problem ~~using~~ ^{using} "I".
the level of criticism in this country is limited mainly to "I like it" or "I do not like it", a consideration that is totally useless to anyone creating anything.

as a dramaturg I am limited in who I can work with. I can help make something better, clearer, only when the basic working-relationship is one of mutual respect. Not uniformity of thinking and feeling (there is no creative dialogue possible in uniformity), total agreement), but a basis of sympathy. Ideally with everyone involved in the process.

So I can really only work with friends. When I run out of friends to work with in the theatre, I will ~~work in another field~~. ^{do something else.}

everyone ~~working~~ ^{creative} in the theatre should take breaks, should enter other fields, should experience other worlds. ~~the theatre does not replenish itself.~~

I once met a n old actor who ~~had~~ played 500 parts, but never did anything outside the theatre, he was still an actor, but the person was gone.

~~we~~ ^{we} non-actors in the theatre (shapers, developers, critics, reviewers, dramaturgs) should be conscious of the limitations of ^{our} ~~their~~ perceptions, of tired eyes. Only with that consciousness can we constantly re-open ourselves to experience anew. At least we should try.

a few more examples of dramaturgical questions:

ex.:

when we started working on Nightwalk, we envisaged a journeyer and a guide (~~like Dante and Virgil~~), then we discovered ~~how non-existent~~ the journeyer is, a receptacle of experience, a reporter, and how boring guides usually are. boring and pompous and all-knowing.

so one day, on the way to wine and Japanese food, we found this idea: that ~~the~~ one of the travellers would be a creature, ~~xxxxxx~~ who sees for the first time, who ~~travels through the world~~ views the passing worlds with a fresh eye. The creature's 'guide' was another Traveller, a human being, someone who has seen much, but can still see.

ex.

when we started working on A Fable , we started out thinking that on this journey we would have 2 journeyers on different journeys.

~~we~~ after many weeks of struggling with that idea, we ended up with one journeyer, who has different encounters with persons, who are all journeyers themselves. The many different lives they have lived are journeys.

ex.:

the original "Dybbuk" had many different stories. the character of the messenger in the original version was too all-knowing, too much a mysterious link between heaven and earth. so we changed him into a maggid, a travelling storyteller. The maggid told 2 stories The Heart and the Spring, a story by Reb Nachmen from Bratzlav, adapted by Corey Fishher who played the maggid and a very straight parable about the selfishness of richness. we listened to the first story without tiring of it, but opinions were divided on the second story. then we decided that the message of the second story was already clearly in the play. and that we could use that story-telling space to tell something more pertinent. one of the ideas we tried to make clear was that in this world that we were creating, the imagination about death was unlimited, ~~is~~. So one day some of us sat together and invented a story about different images of dying. ~~is~~ About a man who couldn't die, ^{who} ~~is~~ could only dream about death.

ex.:

when I first translated the Dybbuk, we discovered that ~~was~~ a word in Yiddish has many different ~~translation~~ possibilities of translation. sometimes more than one word covers one word in the original language, sometimes it is hard to know which way of saying something is better. so I made a multiple choice translation, ~~leaving~~ giving the actors a chance to feel out different ways of saying something, giving us a chance to listen. But also indicating to the actor that s/he ~~is~~ has a right to think.

ex.

one of the most fascinating projects we have been working on ~~ix~~ is the Winterproject.. This is ~~our~~ the second year that we are meeting with actors, musicians, composers, writers to work on ~~QUESTIONS~~ questions of theatre.

what are the questions that are important to ask in the theatre now?

who is the audience?

- what ^{experiences} can be transmitted?

what are the limits we want to test?

what do we like to see in the theatre as an audience?

what is funny?

- how do people see? how ~~are~~ is their seeing influenced by the person ~~they~~ they are sitting next to?
- how does an audience see the action 'through' another person?
- how do people listen, pretend to listen?

the questions

this year we ~~are~~ will try to test different questions with different audiences:

e.g. the theatre-community or people who go to the theatre a lot.

people who have never been to the theatre

specific groups (e.g. all men, all women, all children, dentists, all black ghetto-kids, all Jews, etc.)

in this project we are not planning to make a unified piece on one theme, but to find forms and structures, exercises and material, ways to test some of the questions that we ask.

the works I referred to are:

"Nightwalk", the last piece of the Open Theatre, a journey of 2 beings, the Creature and the Traveller, through many different worlds. The piece had a number of writers , who were mainly absent.

["Electra", writer RRobert Montgomery. We did Electra twice. ~~Once with~~ The first time with Michelle Collison playing Electra, the second time Tina Shepard.]

"A Fable", writer J-Cl. Van Itallie, ~~another journey~~. The ^{the king} journeyer meets different people (e.g. a person under a stone, the hanged woman, the hermit, the grandmother).

1977/8

"The Dybbuk", written by S. Anski, translated by me from the original Yiddish, adapted, changed, reshaped by Joseph Chaikin and me with input of ~~a number of~~ the actors.

1976/7
1977/8

"The Winterproject", a very special theatre-research in its second year of exploration.

ex.:

the ending of Anki's original story is ~~approximately~~ :

if a person would work on his soul
the way this acrobat works on his body
what deep abysses could he cross
on the thin/delicate thread of life.

As a dramaturg I try to give the process of working steps
with the right to described in these stages:

different stages of work - the changing questions.

stage 1:

we define the area of exploration.

we try to find the questions we will concern ourselves with
and open them up.

questions:

what has value ^{for us} to attempt to express,
personally, theatrically, socially, politically?

we don't try to find solutions, answers,
but we promote a dialogue, a consciousness about
these questions.

what are we attempting to explore and express with
this work?

[ex.:

in working on the Döbbuk, one of the questions
we were concerned with was: what is it like to be
a woman in traditional Judaism? how can we make
the position of the woman clear without promoting
and therefore reinforcing it?

we created, more or less successfully, a community
of women and I wrote a scene in which the women
prepare Leah, ~~the bride~~ for her wedding.

at this stage the different labeled functions ^{she]}
in the work merge and overlap. actors, director,
writer(s), invited guests, dramaturg - all
contribute according to their own ability and skill.
the dramaturg contributes to the texture of thought.