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Selbstbewusst abweichen

To diverge with self confidence

I.

How can I learn to write a drama?

What rules do I have to know to create a play?

These are very common questions, also asked by students, mostly, when they are about to have the strange experience of losing themselves in the nightmarish jungle of constructions. At that moment their need to get a short answer is very strong, even aggressive, to get it told in two or maybe three sentences, to receive a clear solution, one which will lead them immediately out of the hell they're in.

It is that very special moment we all know: you are desperately lost in your material, and instead of getting some distance, you start to force the final result, even with violence.

And I have to tell them, that there is no such masterplan, no structural drawing, no general guide, which can tell you how to build a drama. You simply won't find one.

What you can do is to discover the particular moments, which are essential for drama.

After such an answer I can see their anger - as I also can see their impatience.

Of course I understand them and their reactions.

It reminds me of a situation when I was a child:

My mother used to blow and to turn the spoon in the soup when I wasn't able to eat it because it was too hot. And by stirring the soup and blowing, the steam became even more, so I started to hate her, as I always was thinking that she's making the soup even hotter, instead of cooler.

Of course, there are actually many guides to playwriting and other types of books full of technical support and explanations.

But none of them can really give you a true basic knowledge about dramatic art and its essence, its secrets.

Rules can hardly lead you there, to the place where you will discover drama's secrets.

The fundamentals are ultimately so simple in the end, yet they look very complicated at the beginning.

This explains an interesting phenomenon, you quite often can observe: I call it the phenomenon of the first play, which is very often the best for a long time.

It has been written almost by instinct, you feel like a genius, while the second one makes you feel like an idiot.

In my opinion it has to do with those basics I've just mentioned which ultimately seem so simple, and yet escape one's grasp at the start.

So I see my students struggling, recognizing the battle from my own work. I see them writing and unwriting as they drift away from the path, from the reason they're writing in the first place. They've often written more than two hundred pages, all the while not knowing where to go, hacking new paths in that jungle, and actually getting more and more lost.

Sometimes the only advice that I can give them when I observe them lost in that jungle is: if you really want to get to your destination, put the whole thing away, that's right, all those pages. And start from the beginning. Start from that point where you cradled the conflict in your hands. You knew where you were.

It's not that I believe one has to suffer before he or she's able to create art.

But I think that often one can get more by losing - instead by pursuing.

By losing the material, losing the presumptions, losing all the other stories around, losing the common language, losing the words, losing the whole stuff which is surrounding you and your play - than you will very often rediscover the dramatic point in it.

You will probably also find the final and adequate form and expression.

By letting yourself undergo such a process you will have learned much more than rules can ever teach you.

Of course there are parameters which make a play different from any other literary text: the parameters of time and space, which constitute any play. And there is the audience. It can be extremely enlightening to reflect just about these three essential issues.

II.

The talk about rules and technical advice is one of the central points regarding scenic writing. It used to be the main program of such classes.

There is for instance the proverb saying that in a first step you have to learn the rules in order to be able to break them.

This proverb is still very common. But it doesn't convince me.

As it expresses again a dependence on rules.

Okay, so what rules?

What kind of drama am I speaking about?

There are many different forms of drama, there's not just one.

What happens, when those rules I have to learn don't have anything to do with the form I am interested in?

Why should I learn the rules until I can break them - when I am not even interested in breaking them, as I am not interested in that form?

Rules might break you faster than you gain the capacity to break them.

I don't think dramatic writing has only to do with learning rules for breaking them.

It takes a long time to learn rules - wouldn't it be more important to know the different forms - to learn to analyze them? And by the way: to get behind the basic moments which all those different forms have in common?

Let me tell you about a moving experience I had once when I was invited to participate in the final examinations for dramatic writing.

This anecdote is all about how to teach and learn this art.

Among the final plays of the students there was one desperate manifesto written by a student, which declares that he has failed totally.

He describes his failure by his inability to handle the fact that everything has been already thought and written. And he finishes with the sentiment that now the desperate battle with or against the dramatic form and writing is finally over.

In other words: the final exam - the play he should have been writing, was the confession that he has given up. He won't be a playwright anymore.

This was a shock on a human level. And the condition of the writer was too.

He looked like an exhausted soldier who had been fighting for a long time - he was a total wreck.

He had given four years of his life to discover his failure. Four years is a long time to then come to the conclusion that you're not good enough.

Not good enough for what?

The failure of that playwright was not just any failure; it was clear to me that he had failed at a certain type of play. He couldn't put it in these terms at the time, but he had failed at classical drama, plays with dialogues and stage directions, with clear plots and stories that are set in a closed fictional world. Plays that can be very fascinating - mainly because they work on strong economical structures.

This play, known in Germany as the Kammerspiel or as Geschlossenes Drama, also as Well-Made-Play, is very often taken as the one and only way of writing a play.

But it is just one form among a lot of others.

Whose failure was the declared failure of the student? - One could ask. The student's, or the school's?

The answer depends on one's idea of theater and its function.

It seems to me quite obvious that the school was focused on that certain type of drama, a form that has been proven, a form which is easily recognizable and which gives no new challenges to the audience. The audience needs to get the plot and the story, but not a form that has changed.

The well-made play has survived multiple generations and epochs; it's come to be thought of as ahistorical or transhistorical.

From this point of view, the school focused on a real job for their students - with a certain price: that you have to fulfill certain rules.

There is another idea of theater, understood as an art that responds to the present time, which always is in a changing state, with different questions, different answers and different solutions that need to be taken into consideration, and last but not least: with a different and changing meaning of the individual and the society.

It is obvious that this understanding of theater requires different forms of expressions. The present time is the dramatic material, which also demands reflections about the form. Even more: Any reflection about the form of expression has political implications, and is understood as a critical and controversial statement towards established forms.

You can see that student in exactly this kind of struggle: how can I use the form when the form does not express anything of that which the current time is expressing? - and it's the current time that is the one for which I would like to find the adequate form and language!

These divergent meanings of theater might be easily comprehensible.
But surely not for an art school.

So to return to my question regarding whose failure the declared failure of the student was: In my opinion it was the failure of the school.

The school did not offer him a capacious enough sense of the theatre in order that he can then make his own choices.

The school did not support the student's independent search for form and expression, rather it only supported the idea of his need to master a certain form.

An art school should never go so far as to force its students to a certain form - rather, an art school should just offer the ways to discover what this art is deeply involved with.

A school should make known, help its students to discover for themselves the possibilities and ways of seeing, writing and making theater.

III.

There is an additional reason why the failure of the student is not a real one in my view.

In order to explain why I think that he did not actually fail at all, I will try to focus on some points that I find important to understand about dramatic writing - and about theatre.

(And in this way I hope to offer some reasons for teaching and learning dramatic writing at a school.)

The text of the student was actually a really strong dramatic manifesto.

Of course it was no Well-made-play, no fiction surrounded by a fictional universe, it was no Geschlossenes Drama, but there was strong dialogue, even if it was monologue.

This means that the text was clearly addressed to an audience. And it included a public appearance.

And it had presence.

Let me explain that presence is one of those secrets I was talking about in relation to dramatic texts.

First of all because presence is actually quite difficult to accomplish.

We hardly write about present things - we mostly are coming from the near or further past.

Writing mostly has to do with retaining the past - not the present.

The presence is at the same time a state "in between".
The typical theatre-scene is best described as a being in between.
That's what differentiates drama from the novel or the epos.
Also conflict is located in between two or more positions.

What else made his text a successful dramatic text?

There was a strong figure, speaking in a real, that is convincing, honest manner.
Behind this figure there were just ruins and the remains of illusions and expectations, in front of him there was nothing. It was a figure, who gave up on wanting more than he was. One could hear a very clear voice, a voice that did not have anything surplus to the self - but actually even less. In that depicted process of losing everything, the playwright generated an individual.

In order to declare that he has finally given up trying to master a special form in which he might never succeed, he was starting to find another convincing form.
There was again the power of an expression, the sovereignty of his fantasy, the courage to approach dramatic speech - which always is measureless and has to do with the courage of a radical subjectivity.

The topic was definitely a dramatical one. Failing is a main issue--and not just in dramatic speech.

But there's more.

As he declares his departure from a field and a society and a profession to which he had belonged for four years, he is connecting with a central point in European theatre.

All of European theatre deals with the question of the individual and the community.

The beginning of European tragedy was linked to the birth of the individual.

The birth of the individual is at the same time a tragic moment. As it has to do with the experience of being separated. Ever since the individual exists, it exists as a tragic figure. It was generated in the same time it was detached.

The first experience the individual makes is the experience of being alone. Just think of Orestes, who recognizes himself as an individual after the moment he feels guilty and outcast.

Being in the European theatre means to diverge from the group.

IV.

I am convinced that individuals will discover the essential things they should know about dramatic writing

one) by being engaged with the theory,

two) by knowing the history of theatre, which is very strongly linked to theoretical reflections, and

three) by being able to analyze plays.

You will discover the common basics in all of those different forms, starting from the Greek tragedy to the common forms of today.

And you will also experience a very important thing: any different form of drama and theatre had to be strongly defended - any of them was a divergence from the established form. Any established form was originally a divergence.

For this reason the history of theatre should be told and taught as the history of a divergence, instead of as the history of established forms.

There is one more point I want to cover, to uncover, to recover for you here: the deepest reason to diverge in the European theatre always had to do with reflections about the individual, first with the need to get free and second: with the need to get real, to be true to oneself.

Even forms that we would label today as "Illusionstheater" - like the naturalistic play with its idea of reproducing reality on stage by using a very high elaborated artificiality, was once understood as a strong step towards "the real," the true.

I am wondering how future generations will judge our documentary-era, which is how I would label theater today.

Knowing the importance of divergence will give you the most important key to writing your own plays: confidence in your own divergence. Because it is a part of art.

Art can never be strong in fulfilling expectations- but always is in the divergence from them.