

Responsible Playwriting

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The words we write are spoken on a stage. Our audience has gathered and even paid to hear these words. The spectators sit in the auditorium in the dark, watching the characters and events we had created for them. Sometime they are moved. Sometime they are shocked. Sometime they might even go through an experience which causes a significant emotional change, a change in their convictions and beliefs. Their experience is the proof of the power of our writing. Therefore we must take our words seriously and write as responsibly as possible. Wrong writing could be detrimental.

Some of us will say: Why should we be accountable for what we write? We only tell stories. We only entertain our audience. This might be true in many cases, but is the entertaining of our audience the full potential of our words? It seems to me that entertaining our audience is only a part of this potential. As a matter of fact, it's even a very small part of it.

I hope that most playwrights will agree that the full potential of our words is to enlarge the consciousness of our audiences, to show them human nature in a deep and moving way, to shed light on the hidden foundations of our society and its political ideological structure.

How do we do it?

It's quite evident that in order to obtain the full potential of our writing it must be as deep as possible. Most of us will also agree that deep writing is writing multi-tier characters, whose many layers are being exposed throughout the plot by the conflicts they have between one another. This mechanism of exposing one layer after the other ensures that at the end of the play we succeed in tearing away all the masks from the faces of our characters, exposing something we might call "truth" – which in our context means the deepest layers in the persona of the character.

Most of us will also agree that this depth we seek cannot be achieved without accuracy. By accuracy we mean the accuracy of the exploration and exposition of the characters and their actions, we mean the accuracy of their dialogue, the accuracy of the emotional processes which they go through, and the accuracy of the analysis of the socio-political context in which they live.

The combination of depth and accuracy is crucial in our writing because it enables us to confront the lies, the demagoguery, the false myths and the propaganda of the institutions and regimes in the society we live in. History can hardly point out regimes and institutions which were willing to expose their goals and their methods. Most regimes and institutions, most political, religious, economical and military powers usually protected their own interests which in many times did not coincide with the interests of most of the people in the audience.

Responsible writing is writing with deep and accurate consciousness of the political, social, religious, ideological context. It is writing with full awareness of the interests of the regime and other powerful institutions in the society. It is subversive writing, which enables the members of the audience to realize how they are being manipulated and exploited by these institutions – whether these are political, social, religious or economical ones.

Some of you might wonder how all this goes along with artistic freedom, with freedom of writing and freedom of expression. The responsible writing does not contradict all these. On the contrary; responsible writing ensures that the artistic freedom, the freedom of writing and the freedom of expression will be used in a significant and meaningful way.

Let us be more specific: In order to achieve the goals of responsible playwriting – i.e. deep and accurate playwriting which will enlarge the consciousness of our audience, expose human nature in a deep and moving way, shed light on the hidden foundations of our society and its political ideological structure - we have to use effective dramatic tools: Fully developed characters and fully developed plot. But I'm sure that many playwrights will agree that the strongest tool available for the playwright is the catharsis of the protagonist. The catharsis is a powerful tool not only because it generates the climax of the play, including huge pains and horrors, deep and meaningful realizations for the main characters – but also because as a result of the empathy between the spectator and the protagonist, the spectator too goes through the exact same pains and horrors as the protagonist, and he too might come out of the play with deep existential realizations – following the realizations of the protagonists. The catharsis is not a tool to convince a spectator to agree or embrace a new idea. The catharsis provides a deep and painful experience that forces the spectator to deal existentially with his own self in his own context – in light of the catastrophe of the protagonist.

Aristotle defined the catharsis of the protagonist with only a few plays in front of him. Now, after more than 25 centuries of theatre and thousands of plays, we might be able to offer a slightly different definition. I suggest defining the catharsis of the protagonist along the following principles:

- a) The Catharsis is the personal-internal process that the protagonist goes through from the beginning of the play to its end.
- b) This process is progressing because of the escalating conflicts that the protagonist generates with his antagonists, in order to fulfill his action.
- c) At the end of this process these escalating conflicts result in a catastrophe and the protagonist is defeated. He fails to fulfill his main action and comes to a realization of the hubris in his struggle to fulfill it.

Let's look at "Oedipus Rex" as an example: Oedipus' main action is to achieve sovereignty over his destiny. From the moment he heard from the Oracle in Delphi that he was destined to kill his father and sleep with his mother, he did everything possible to avoid it. Throughout the plot he discovers that he did kill his father and did sleep with his mother as was determined by the gods, and just as the Oracle had told him. The spectator who empathizes with Oedipus goes through the same discovery - that the gods rule the world and that man is unable to be sovereign of his fate. But what does this spectator leave the theatre with? Does he leave with the realization that struggling for sovereignty over his life is a mistake? No. Oedipus' failure and his discovery of the hubris in the struggle to be sovereign over his destiny have the opposite effect on the spectator – they strengthen the spectator to continue his struggle for his own sovereignty.

In other words, "Oedipus Rex" is not a play written to warn the spectators of their gods. On the contrary, "Oedipus Rex" is a sophisticated subversive play which encourages human beings to struggle for their supremacy over their gods. This is the reason why this play has been so important in our culture until today.

Sophocles knew that the catharsis of the protagonist is the strongest tool available to the playwright. He also knew that he must use it in a responsible way. And the most responsible way he knew was to direct it against the most powerful institution in Athens – against the gods. We must learn from him to write plays that generate strong catharsis for our protagonists, and to direct this catharsis against our gods – whoever they are.