

books on how to publish in Russia or how to publish in Russia, publishing them, in NE of Moscow were impressively fast, especially as they had to translate them first.

Most of my books are reasonably large volumes, 70-90,000 is my normal wordage, and two of the titles the Russians took, *The Great Ships Pass* and *Action Imminent*, were well over 150,000 words. This pair will be published as separate books, but one novel factor of publishing in Russia is that they

are, indeed, very fast. In NE of Moscow, in Russia, be careful, very careful, but do not be afraid. It is a vast audience and eager for knowledge after so long in the dark. Embrace and enjoy the experience. Now, if only I could crack those Frenchmen...

For further information on PETER C. SMITH and his books go to [www.dive-bombers.co.uk](http://www.dive-bombers.co.uk).

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# The struggle of drama

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## JULIA PASCAL ANALYSES HOW AND WHY WRITING PLAYS IS SO DIFFERENT FROM WRITING PROSE

How does an author make the transition from page to stage? The question hit me last year when I was asked to teach playwriting to American students at St Lawrence University's London campus.

Katie, Clementine, Tim and Josh were asked to begin the term with a monologue. Dutifully they arrived with their manuscripts but, when they read them out, it wasn't drama it was pure prose. They had to learn fast that the stage was no place for cool reflection. How was I to help them move from the literary to the active? How was I to show them that exposition is death on stage and that theatre is about living people with different voices and speech patterns? Drama is conflict. Drama is action. And, within that action, there has to be the three-act structure essential in every speech and scene and fundamental to the overall construction. There is no time for description. Actors provide the visuals as do sets. The writer can describe décor but character has to be painted with speech rhythms and through psychological insight.

In her last novel, *Unless*, Carole Shields discusses the fiction writer's need for description: '...how painstakingly must I describe Alice's apartment. Fiction demands pitiless enumeration.' And drama demands the opposite. My students

had to learn to see the stage picture and then allow their characters to inhabit it. When I was writing *Crossing Jerusalem* for the Tricycle Theatre last year, Artistic Director Nicolas Kent told me, 'the set is another character'. It hit home.

And as for plot, well character is plot. What people decide in their life drives the narrative forward. Plot cannot come before character.

Back to those monologues. Josh has written about a woman fire-fighter who survived 9/11. She is in crisis and talks about losing her comrades. It's all in the past tense and it's all exposition. There is no action or change. I explain that, even in a monologue, the three-act structure must be present. There has to be a beginning, a middle and an end. It doesn't have to be linear, it doesn't have to be obvious, but it has to be there. The monologue should direct the action forward by showing rather than telling. The fire-fighter doesn't need to explain to her audience, 'I lost my friends', she can show it. I suggest, 'Suppose her behaviour, her action, reveals her inner breakdown.' Josh returns with a different monologue where the woman talks about cigarettes. Little by little it becomes clear she has gone back on fags because she is breaking up inside. Josh has managed to show us what is going on by the way his character

lets slip tiny hints of horror. Therefore we are forced to guess her story, which is far more engaging. The students have made a great leap and we move on to dialogue.

Now we explore what happens when several people are in the same scene. How does a scene serve the larger structure of the play? Is it really necessary? How do we explore several personalities interacting? The novelist has time to present the multiple viewpoint, something which is very hard to present on stage. Prose writers flip easily from first to third person, but in theatre everyone is in the first person; there can be no outside narrative voice. The inner monologue is difficult to pull off when delivered straight out and it can appear clumsy. The strongest drama is struggle. Theatre needs an antagonist and a protagonist. The audience has to see what the central struggle is. There is no place for padding.

I become fascinated by the differences between prose and theatre. Shields writes, 'Characters in books need to be supplied with a childhood of some sort, with parents at the very least, sometimes even grandparents.' Shields gives herself time to let the audience feel the texture of family background. Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* has to show genetic history even more crucially for his plot to work, but how does the stage writer show character when there is only two hours' stage time? The answer is in *how* the character speaks, dresses, behaves,

interacts. Again it is Show Don't Tell time. The writer must know the background of each character and from which family they come, but this has to be transmitted in behaviour rather than by description. It has to be implicit not explicit. In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, we can feel the visceral nature of David Mamet's characters by the way they cut deals. The great modern American playwrights, such as Arthur Miller and David Mamet, show us huge characters with whom we immediately connect. But the world of action has traditionally been a male world and playwriting is still a male-dominated profession. My women students needed more encouragement to dare to write shocking characters but they get there, perhaps by seeing another woman do it.

The students were asked to write characters based on people they knew. At first they were reticent, 'in case it's not exactly true'. There is often shame or fear at representing someone in their own lives, but once I told them that nobody was checking up on them (why do we all have the thought police in our heads?) and that the character was a jumping-off point not someone in a documentary, they were released. These young Americans were all coming from naturalism. It was clear that satire, irony and experimentation were not part of their experience and yet they were used to it in movies. A kind of over-reverential feeling about stage work seemed to come from their first impulse to write prose. Over the term, they saw different types of London theatre which opened up their imaginations. In fact they all did have wild characters in their heads but hadn't known how to access them. We talked about war and how it changes character. I showed them ways of writing about war from my own plays but soon realised that World War Two was like the Middle Ages to them. Finally, Tim, a shy student, spoke about an uncle who had been in Vietnam. 'Write him!' I said. The veteran turned out to be one of the most dangerous characters produced all term. Once Tim realised that he could use the man's experience in his writing, he saw how to present huge political situations through the personal, and his timid style became more muscular.

When we came to dialogue, the students turned out beautifully-crafted sentences as if they were essay writing. 'People don't talk in perfect English,' I told them, and then made them improvise a situation where one person wants something and the other refuses to give it. Their sentences were rough and unfinished. They fast learnt to copy from their own speech patterns and for the first time their writing became real drama.

The students got a strong creative shock from their playwriting course and realised that much of what they had learned would affect other areas of writing. They realised that theatre is a collective experience like a rock concert or a football match. Most of all, they jumped over the fear barrier to explore dangerous characters and give them life on stage. Polite prose became a memory as they created their own rough, tough theatre.

**JULIA PASCAL's** stage plays are published by Oberon Books.

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