

Talking the talk by walking the walk: towards a new language of playwriting through devised performance.

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Abstract

Much has been said and written about the features of playwriting from a stylistic perspective, but this has tended to focus on plays written in the 'traditional' manner of a lone writer toiling away in a garret, producing an artefact for ready consumption by the producer, director, actors and ultimately, audience. However, many theatrical performances are of course not constructed in this way. This paper then seeks to examine how when companies, through the process of improvising and devising performances, create their scripts, the dialogic nature of that process produces a work stylistically diverse from those that are custom-made in the traditional manner. To illustrate this, a small experiment was carried out employing the services of both professionally trained actors and non-trained, 'amateurs'. Both sets of participants were asked to devise a dialogue both in front of an audience and in private. It will be argued that the observed results reveal differences in how such devised pieces might constitute a theatrical text for performance.

1. Introduction

In *Poetics*, Aristotle somewhat disparagingly said about playwrights that “*novices* in the art attain to finish off diction and precision of portraiture before they can construct the plot”. This prejudice towards narrative and story-telling over the theatricality of language could arguably still be prevalent in ‘traditional’ playwriting and production today, with its focus on the objectives, super-objectives and psychological characterization of principle protagonists, as well as on the need for a solid narrative arc. However, there has been a movement of late to revive hitherto disparaged or neglected conventions that were once prevalent in theatre all over the world, and in doing so foregrounds the use and play of language to theatrical effect. This ‘language-based’ playwriting as proposed by academics such as Paul Castagno is a movement that has gained momentum in the US, particularly over the last 20 years and has seen playwrights such as Suzan Lori-Parks be awarded a Pulitzer prize and Eric Overmyer go on to develop the genre on TV in shows such as ‘The Wire’, of which he was executive producer. What exemplifies the work of these and other ‘language playwrights’ is the dominance of a certain vernacular, a ‘landscape of language’, that serves to create a world where language is the dominant force by which themes and characters are defined. What better source, then, of material for a theatrical piece that is to be dominated by language, than the speech that occurs in

spontaneous, improvised conversation? But this, of course opens up certain lines of enquiry in itself: what features of conversation make for a valid, entertaining, theatrical performance? How dependent is that theatricality on the performer? On the presence of an audience? On the theatrical setting?

What exemplifies this new, language-based form of playwriting is the eschewing of Aristotelean doctrine and a subversion of traditional rules in order to invent new paradigms and rediscover a certain virtuosity through the use of language. Central to this is Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, with various components of the plays interacting with, referring to and clashing with each other. The result is a work that instead of ‘mirroring’ reality, dares to create its own, carnivalesque world that challenges the single, unifying point of view of a traditional, or monologic play. This relief from the ‘dictatorial’ constraints of the all-powerful author allows the play to explore parameters otherwise out of reach. That is, unfettered by an obligation to drive the plot, fit with the psychological profile of a given character, or adhere to a particular style or genre, the language of the play has free reign to create a patchwork of voices, genres and narrative twists. A summary of the key differences can be seen in fig. 1.

Fig 1. Key differences between traditional and language-based plays

| ‘Traditional’ plays | ‘Language-based’ plays |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Dialogue determined by plot | Dialogue as free radical |
| Monologic | Dialogic |
| Character-specific dialogue | Multivocal characterisation |
| Genre-based | Hybrid of genres |
| Theatre | Metatheatre |
| Language reflects culture | Language is a counterpoint to culture |
| Linear | Juxtaposed |
| Character has internal motivation | Device of language as motivation |
| Protagonist-driven | No central character necessary; maybe an ensemble |

(Castagno, 2001, 2012, p.21; 24)

The question that underpins this paper, however, is: how can the playwright go about creating a text that might achieve these aims?

2. A Personal Anecdote

Some years ago, as part of my Postgraduate research into Performance at Goldsmiths College, University of London, my colleague and I set up a theatre group called *Lame Buckets* (as an anagrammatical nod to our biggest influence at the time, Samuel Beckett). We put on a devised public performance consisting of the two of us, dressed in identical suits, ‘situated’ (placed? dropped? found?) in a stark, totally white studio space with no obvious exits or entrances. The audience was angled on to the space in such a way that we performers were focused into a corner of the studio. The audience came, paid, sat and the lights went up. And that was it. No script, props or plot. Nothing. We had to devise all the material, including at times lengthy silences, for exactly one hour (though we had no watches or timepieces to gauge this) until the lights went down again. And then the audience, somewhat surprisingly to us at first, clapped and even cheered! Most interestingly, one student from the MA playwriting course approached us and asked if he could see a copy of our script. When told that there wasn’t one and that we had improvised the whole performance, he refused at first to believe us, and took some time to be convinced.

Far be it for me to claim that this reaction may be due to the improvisational skills of us as performers. More likely, I suggest, there was something inherent in the conversations/dialogues, activities and silences that seemed scripted or at least, when seen together, were deemed valid as a piece of theatre.

3. An Experiment

Much has been written about how drama dialogue is comparable to real-life conversation and extensive analyses have been made on excerpts of ‘realistic’ plays by, inevitably, writers such as Pinter, Osborne et al. but it may be apposite now to see how, from a variety of perspectives, a set of ideas can be drawn up to inform just how a language-based text may be effectively (and affectively) created.

To this end, my supervisors at the University of Kent and I came up with a low-key, provisional experiment. We found two pairs of actors: one pair of amateurs and one pair of trained, practising professionals. They were then asked to improvise two different duologues, one in private and one in front of an invited audience. Both situations were, however, filmed.

The resulting video footage was then reviewed both from a stylistic perspective and a Conversation Analysis perspective to attempt to account for the choices the actors made and what was actually occurring socio-linguistically when they were speaking.

4. A Brief Analysis

4.1 Discourse Analysis

The first devised dialogue (see transcript, fig. 2) hinged around the opening prompt "Are you not feeling well?". In the amateur version, the actors indulged in the foregrounding of certain elements such as through the repetition of "split up"; internal deviation ('we split up' being a short punch-line, compared to previous utterances, which in turn, seem to exhibit aspects of parallelism in their structure); L's use of a pause before "You're not having a good time are you?" as a dramatic use of understatement that brings this little vignette to a close (despite it being a question). The professionals (fig. 3) seem to rely on a basic question and answer format. There is some repetition of phrases such as in "be good for me", and "would be good for you" - common enough utterances when two acquaintances are discussing one's illness. Additionally, the professionals tend to have a more subdued range of intonation, yet a more measured pace. They place a more considered amount of stress on certain words, avoiding too much force, adding to the 'veracity' of the situation. For example, even in the opening line, A's decision to stress 'not' with a secondary stress on 'feeling' would at first glance seem somewhat unnatural while G's primary stress on 'feeling' would be more logical. However, A's subdued fall-rise questioning intonation gives a certain depth to the enquiry, implying perhaps a mutual pre-knowledge of D's condition. This is in contrast to the amateurs, who may be accused of stylising their speech somewhat in, perhaps, an attempt to achieve dramatic effect. Interestingly, in both versions, the word 'yeah' is used by the confidant (G and A), though for different reasons. G's use of the word is as a filler for the pauses left by L, and to show willingness to go along with the story. A's use, however, is as a way to show empathy with D and his plight even if, superficially, it looks like she is merely agreeing with his suggestions. In this way, I would argue, the professional's conversation has more emotional depth.

Fig 2. Amateurs transcript

L: Are you not feeling very well?

G: Not great, to be fair, hmph

L: What's wrong?

G: So so you know I told you that I was going out with that girl for two years...

L: Yeah

G: And then we split up...

L: Mmmm...

G: ...and then I was going out with the other girl...

L: Mm..yeah

G: We've split up.

(pause)

L: You're not havin' a good time are you?

Fig 3. Professionals transcript

A: Are you not feeling well?

D: Not really

A: (sighs) So what are we gonna do then?

D: Well – I suppose we could go to the seaside.

A: Yeah, you would... the air, the air would be good for you wouldn't it?

D: Yeah, be good for my chest

A: Yeah.

D: And this other thing as well: my...my knees.

A: Yeah. I...I don't know how the air would be good for your knees, but be warm wouldn't it?

D: Yeah, yeah, sit on the sand for a bit. That might, that might or maybe...er...a bit of a swim. That might do 'em some good.

A: Yeah. Well, shall we go then?

D: Yeah. Where did we leave the car?

4.2 Conversation Analysis

In contrast to the focus on discourse above, Conversation Analysis takes into account an ethnomethodological viewpoint, as proposed by Garfinkel and Sacks in the 1960s and 1970s, where the more 'common-sense' or intuitive rules for social interaction are observed. In this, conversations are recorded and transcribed as accurately as possible in order to investigate the "the lived stuff of social reality" (Herman, 1995 p. 55). Key to this analysis is the idea of 'turn-taking' and how, instinctively, we, as social beings, manage to facilitate an orderly interaction

with one another without our conversations descending into chaos. Sacks et al (1978) proposed that there was a mechanism involved here and that this was clearly visible from the data (i.e. transcribed conversations). In short, there is a turn-taking system at play, and one that is deemed to comprise two components: turn constructional and turn allocational. The former involves certain linguistic cues that indicate the closure or predictability of the closure of a turn. The latter occurs when a speaker selects another speaker (perhaps through nodding, gazing, naming etc) to take a turn or when a speaker self-selects. It also caters for the 'failure' option, where a turn may lapse. These 'rules' are apparent in the commonly observed etiquette of everyday speech (e.g. one person should speak at a time, and if not, then the first person to speak has 'rights' over the interrupter).

From a Conversation Analysis perspective, then (see figs 4 and 5), in the recorded conversations of the experiment, the social mechanisms of interaction are apparent, but with certain differences between the pairs. There is certainly a sense of strict obedience by G to the unstated desire by L to tell his story. The dramatic 'role' quickly adopted by G as friend/confidant certainly predicts this. However, L's use of a pause in lines 2 and 5 are not long enough to serve as a signal for G to turn-take, but do serve to highlight what L is about to say, arguably giving him a certain authority in the conversation and rendering G somewhat subservient here (in fact, in the video footage, L's lack of eye-contact at this point may highlight this). Therefore, the amateur pair seem to have been more conscious of the turn-taking protocols, with G almost setting up L's responses of "mm" or "yeah" in order to lead up to the punchline of "we split up" for humorous effect. In essence, the dialogue has more the appearance of a sketch that has been consciously created on the spot, but which may only have superficial comedy appeal. The professional version, I contend, differs. Here, the use of pauses and the sighing of both parties reveal a slower paced conversation than that of the amateurs but one that is arguably more intense. The pause after A's initial question is equalled by A's following the answer. Thus, there is no real power game here. In fact A's role of listener/confidant is more 'realistic' as a friend or someone of equal status to their partner. On the other hand, the final pause before D's change of subject, like L, serves to highlight for potentially comic appeal. These relatively lengthy (uninterrupted) pauses are in contrast to the overlapping in the latter part of the conversation that reveal a less reverential obedience to turn-taking rules. However, the use of 'yeah' (a sign of agreement) and other repair strategies serve to help maintain the fluidity and socially acceptable execution of the dialogue.

Looking at the transcript of a 'real', overheard conversation (fig. 6) that started with the same initial line ("Are you not feeling well"), certain key features of everyday speech are apparent such as breathing/sighing, overlapping, repair, and repetition. In the analysis, these parallel more the features witnessed in the professionals' improvisation, and would therefore suggest a more 'natural', realistic style inherent in the latter. However, the question remains as to whether this in itself should constitute an effective and virtuosic piece of dramatic discourse. It certainly may, for an onlooker/spectator make for a more engaging conversation.

Fig 4. Conversation Analysis (amateurs) transcript

| | |
|----|--|
| 1 | L: Are you not <u>feeling</u> very well. |
| 2 | G: hhh Not great, (0.3) ⁰ to be fair ⁰ (hhntss) |
| 3 | (0.1) |
| 4 | L: What's wrong? |
| 5 | (0.4) |
| 6 | G: SO (.) so you know I told you that I was going out with that girl for two |
| 7 | year:s hhh |
| 8 | L: Yeah |
| 9 | (.) |
| 10 | G: And then we split up, |
| 11 | (.) |
| 12 | L: Mmmm= |
| 13 | G: =and then I was going out with the other girl, |
| 14 | L: Mm, yea::h |
| 15 | (.) |
| 16 | G: We've split up. |
| 17 | (1.0) |
| 18 | L: You're not havin' a good <u>time</u> are you. |

Fig 5. Conversation Analysis (pros) transcript

| | |
|----|--|
| 1 | A: Are you <u>not</u> feeling <u>w</u> e:ll. |
| 2 | (0.3) |
| 3 | D: Not <u>rea::lly</u> . |
| 4 | (0.4) |
| 5 | A: . hhhh hhhhhhhh So what are we gonna do then? |
| 6 | (0.2) |
| 7 | D: Well hhh (.) I supp:ose we could go to the <u>seaside</u> . |
| 8 | (0.2) |
| 9 | A: Yeah, you woul- the air the air would be good for you wouldn't it. |
| 10 | D: Yeah, be good for ma chest= |
| 11 | A: =Yeah:: |
| 12 | (0.3) |
| 13 | D: And this <u>other</u> thing as well (.) my...my knee::s. (.) |
| 14 | A: Yeah. I (.) I don't know how the air would be good for your knee::s, (.) |
| 15 | [but |
| 16 | D: [⁰ well ⁰] |
| 17 | A: be warm wouldn't it?= 18 D: =Yeah (0.2) yeah sit on the <u>sand</u> for a bit That might (0.3) might (.) or 19 maybe (.) er (.) a bit of a <u>swim</u> . That might do'm some good. 20 A: Yeah (0.3) Well, shall we <u>go</u> then. 21 D: YEAH (0.4) Where did we leave the <u>ca:r</u> . |

Fig 6. Conversation Analysis (real conversation) transcript

| | | |
|----|----|--|
| 1 | L: | <u>Are you not feeling</u> very [we:ll, |
| 2 | J: | [⁰ (⁰) ⁰ |
| 3 | | (.) |
| 4 | J: | <u>No</u> , I'm all ri:ght |
| 5 | | (.) |
| 6 | L: | Yes. |
| 7 | | (0.6) |
| 8 | J: | ⁰ Ye:s I'm all right, ⁰ |
| 9 | L: | ⁰ Oh:. ⁰ .hh Yi-m- You know I – I- I'm <u>broiling</u> about something |
| 10 | | hhheh[h _e h .hhhh |
| 11 | J: | [Wh _a :.t. |
| 12 | L: | Well that sa:le. (0.2) At- at (.) the vicarage. |

(Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008, p. 82)

4.3 Acting and Performance

The key to this engagement may lie within the theatricality of the situation. Indeed, when the two pairs (both amateur and professional) were asked to perform a new improvised dialogue¹ in public, the differences were even more noticeable, with the amateurs 'performing' reality to the audience (and admittedly currying mirth from the audience along the way) while the professionals adopted a more subtle yet no less (arguably more) comedic approach. In this performance the amateurs seemed to have a careful, almost reverential approach to the words they were uttering while the professionals were more relaxed and much more confidently employing the elements and idiosyncrasies of conversational speech. This included hesitation, repetition, interruption and, above all, silences. If the resulting performance was more engaging, it must then be asked what there was within the professionals' acting armoury to enable them to draw instinctively and spontaneously on this approach.

In actor training, one of the basic tenets, or maxims, that is taught is 'to be truthful in the moment'. That is, staying in tune to the responses you are receiving from your duologue partner and not be set in your mind as to how a scene should be played. Constantin Stanislavsky, whose psycho-physical approach to acting remains one of the most influential in drama training today,

talked of ‘living the part’. He said “an actor’s job is not to present merely the external life of his character. He must fit his own human qualities to the life of this other person, and pour into it all of his own soul...” (Stanislavsky, 1936, p.14). This is considered to be the difference between ‘seeming’ and ‘being’ on stage, and one of the methods by which this can be attained is by analyzing a given scene through 3 questions: What is the character literally doing? What is his/her action (objective)? What is this like? (or the ‘as if’ question). Taking the first professional duologue (fig. 2) as an example, it could be analysed and approached thus:

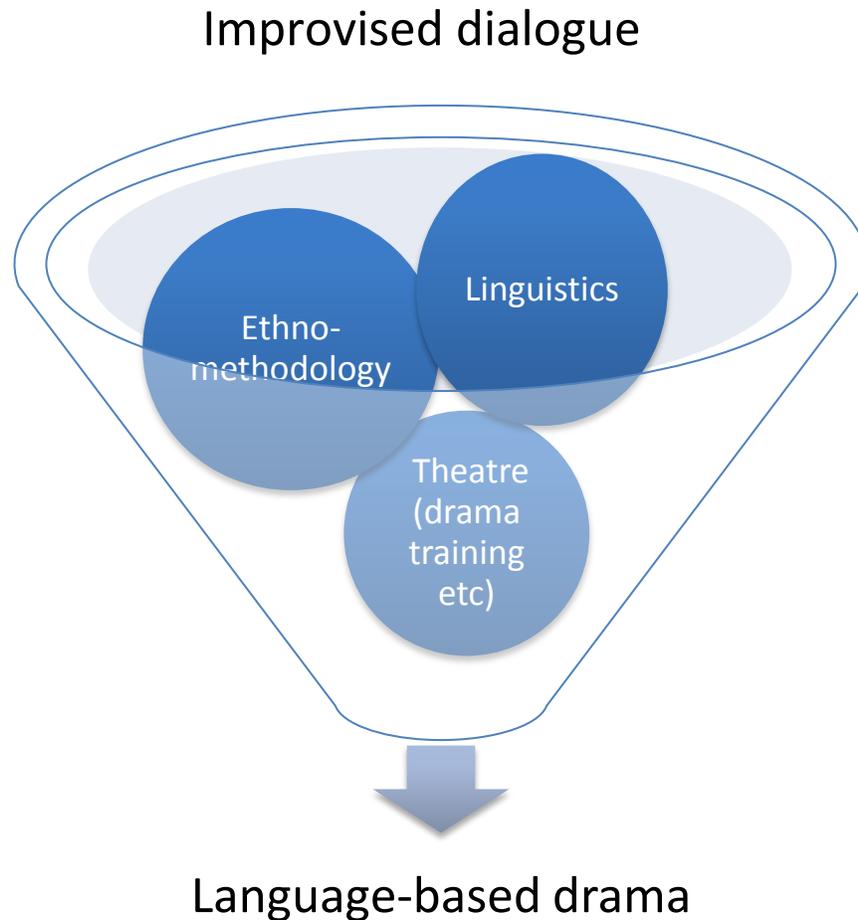
| | |
|--|--|
| What is the character literally doing? | A is asking after D’s health |
| What is his/her action? | Stopping a loved one from giving up |
| What is this like? | It’s as if my father came round to fix my leaking tap but it was too hard and he was becoming frustrated, annoyed and running out of ideas. But I didn’t want to a) see him defeated and b) have a wet kitchen |

It could be then, that the amateurs, when presented with an improvisation exercise ‘stepped up’ to the occasion and attempted a stylized, performed version of a real conversation, and when in front of an audience, heightened that stylization even more. The professionals, however, through their training and on-stage experience, employed a more instinctive approach in the devising of their piece and created a dramatic duologue that would entertain and engage yet would appear to more closely correspond with the kind of natural, non-theatrical speech that we hear everyday.

5. Conclusion

In essence, by analyzing the duologues from 3 perspectives, linguistically, ethnomethodologically and from drama training, it may be possible to get to the nub of how improvised discourse can inform a new approach to text creation (fig. 7).

Fig 7. From improvised dialogue through analysis to play-text creation



Now, the reference to Stanislavskyan technique (and by extension, the Method school of acting that stemmed from it) would seem to fly in the face of the tenets behind this new Language-based drama paradigm. Indeed, the dialogic play eschews the character-specific dialogue, and the uninterrogated objective status quo of the traditional, ‘monologic’ play. After all, the dialogic play seeks to create a new reality rather than mirror the one in which we live. It is my contention, however, that the use of spontaneous speech coupled with the devising process actually serves to heighten the dialogic nature of the subsequent script rather than subdue it. The demonstration of ‘reality’ in plays does not necessarily mean being subject to the unified whims of the lone playwright. The use of improvised speech actually opens up the playwriting field to encompass a whole world of speech idiosyncrasies which can be morphed, warped, knitted together,

juxtaposed, used, in fact, in any way the playwright(s) fancy to create a stage reality that may or may not be akin to that of real life but certainly uses some of real life's ingredients (i.e. conversational speech) to dramatic effect.

Taking, for example, one side of the duologue from fig 1., mixing up those speech turns at random and then inserting new interjections from the other character could produce something like this:

(/ shows where speeches overlap)

Chips: Mmmm...

Gravy: (*not looking*) Have you seen my... I can't find that bloody...fuse! /13 amp

Chips: / Mm... yeah

Gravy: Christ! This just isn't going to work

(PAUSE)

Chips: What's wrong?

Gravy: I'm going down the shop

Chips: You're not having a good time, are you?

(PAUSE)

Gravy: Look... Don't.... Just... /Yeah?

Chips: /Yeah

Gravy: I don't... I just don't... I can't. With you. Any more.

Chips: Are you not feeling very well?

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ENDNOTE

¹ The given scenario was of a patient visiting a doctor with the hope of receiving a sick-note to relieve him of his duties as a driver despite being clearly physically well. This was in order to cover up the fact from his boss that he was facing a 6-month driving ban for speeding.

