

(IM) Personal Narratives
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A Scriptwriting Workshop

by
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This material was specially prepared for the Laboratory and its practitioners. It is based on the scriptwriting tool "A Little Book of Traps", originally published by the Dramatic Institute in Stockholm in 2002 and revised, translated and published into other few languages.

The workshop in dramaturgy looks at scripting in generic terms and it is not language/text based. Just like Im-personal narratives offer endless possibilities for construction of identity and creative expression so scripting offers endless possibilities of "driving" meaning, artistic articulation and structural variations.

The section of the dramatic Who is particularly pertinent in terms of dramatizing identity, psychological and social relations: sex, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, geography, religion.

This material offers narrative strategies to enhance the process of SHOWING identities and cultural conflict in a simple, concrete and accessible way.

CONTRASTS, OPPOSITES, CORNERS: SCRIPTWRITING TRAPS

You don't write plays, you make them. Just as a "wheelwright" is a maker of wheels, so a "playwright" is a maker of plays. One can make a powerful script without using words at all. There is a substance in scriptwriting which precedes "the word" and which is stronger than words.

The primary scripting elements are dramatic opposites, contrasts, contradictions and incongruities. These oppositions are dynamic units containing potential dramatic energy, tension and friction. They are potential dramatic traps i.e. elementary script-building blocks. They are primary dramatic elements, just as vegetables, meat and water are primary cooking ingredients. A few examples of opposites: good/evil, in/out, left/right, black/white, sweet/sour, life/death, strong/weak, private/public, personal/impersonal, love/hate, peace/war etc. etc. *ad infinitum*.

This material presents a toolbox for recognition and production of dramatic traps. It consists of six fundamental tools with which anything and everything can be turned into scripting material and given endless variations of meaning. Any element, image, text, idea or concept can be turned into an active dramatic trap when it is combined with any other contrasting, opposite or contradictory element, image, text, idea or concept from the six limitless databases and inexhaustible paradigms of potential scripting matter: The Where, The When, The Who, The Why, The What and The How.

The technique of "laying traps" works through the methods of finding the ironic principle, the contra: looking for the opposite, searching for the contradiction, establishing the counter-movement, the counterbalance, the contraposition, the contrast.

THE WHERE: Traps of place

The scriptwriting Where deals with the properties of place, space and location of the action. Look at a narrative and pay close attention to the way it deals with these settings. How crucial are the choices of place, space and location for the overall dramatic action? Are they crucial enough? Would the action be stronger if it was set somewhere else? Is the setting of place, space and location an active dramatic trap?

Here are a few general examples of places and locations which contain a strong embedded sense of contrast and contradiction and can function as dramatic traps:

Corridors of power
 Off the beaten track
 In the dragon's den
 On the edge of a cliff
 In harm's way
 Forbidden city
 Crime scene - do not cross

Private property - do not trespass
 Point of no return
 Magic garden
 Exile
 Locked up room
 Ends of the earth
 Infinity
 On the road
 Underworld
 Somewhere over the rainbow
 Out of the frying pan and into the fire
 Between a rock and hard place
 On a knife's edge
 The internet - the World Wide Web
 The eye of the storm
 In the middle of nowhere
 A Place in the sun
 Wild West/Wild East
 etc. etc. etc. *ad infinitum*

Here are some more specific examples of places as traps: 42nd Street - a trap for a first-time tourist, Bermuda Triangle - where ships disappear for no reason, big cities like New York, L.A. or Paris, backwater small places like Paris-Texas, exotic places like Jerusalem, Machu Pichu, Everest or Copacabana, a brothel, imaginary places like Xanadu, Atlantic or Eldorado, Utopia which is a No-place, cars which sometimes fly, planes which sometimes have snakes on it, a Yellow Submarine, circus, theatre, church, deep forest, stuck elevator, graveyard, haunted house, heaven, hell, home invaded by an intruder, the subconscious in-between worlds, minefields, top of the world, a stressful office, police station, courtroom, sewers, shopping malls, deep space where no one can hear you scream, black hole which not even light can escape from, killing fields like Vietnam and Bosnia used to be etc. etc. etc. *ad infinitum*

Exercises:

- Find examples of the Where from your experience in which there are strong contradictions, sharp oppositions, deep contrasts, funny discrepancies
- Choose one place and location and weave your personal narrative in it. Produce a scene or an episode around it.
- Turn the room you are in into a trap where borders overlap: synchronous, multiple and shifting borders, private borders, state borders, neighbourhood borders, body borders, mind borders. Walk your way through it. Devise a scene or an episode.

The When: Traps of time

The scriptwriting When deals with the properties of time, timing, rhythm, sequencing, pace or edit of the action. Look at a narrative and pay close attention to the way it deals with these settings. How crucial are the choices of time, timing, rhythm, sequencing and pace for the overall dramatic action? Are they crucial enough? Would the action be stronger if it was given a different duration or different chronology? Is the setting of time and timing an active dramatic trap?

Here are a few general examples of time and timing which contain a strong embedded sense of contrast and contradiction and can function as dramatic traps:

Afterlife

Back to the future

Deadline

Deja vu

Dystopian times (end of the world)

Circularity

Time going backwards

Time out

Hour of need

Now

Once upon a time

Real time

Rite of passage

Eternal youth

Subjective time

Synchronicity

Time warp

Interval

Utopian times (paradise now)

Fragmentary time

Continuity / Discontinuity

Time Capsule

In the nick of time

Small hours

Phase/phases/phasing

No time to lose

All the time in the world

Time waits for no one

Time, gentlemen!

Living in the past

Future shock

Rite of passage

Time and time again

Show-time

Time zone / Greenwich meantime

In the midnight hour

Time machine
 Time bomb
 Time/space continuum
 Jump cut
 Time loop
 Speeded up time
 Slow motion
 Rewind
 Freeze frame
 Flash back
 Flash forward
 Real time
 Countdown
 etc. etc. etc. *ad infinitum*

Here are some more specific categories of examples of time traps: *Historical Era or Epoch*: AD/ BC, ancient Greece or Rome, prehistory, a particular millennium, the middle ages or Fin de siècle. *Historical date*: 1492, 1984 or 2525. *Decade*: the roaring Twenties, the Fifties, the swinging Sixties. *Time of Year*: golden autumn, dead of winter, leap year, merry, merry month of May. *Time of Day*: 24 hours non-stop, break of day, from dusk till dawn, yesterday / tomorrow, manic Monday. *Moment or Instance*: split second, the moment of death, when the bell rings, when the rooster crows. *Stages of Life*: childhood, school years, old age, retirement, puberty, teenage years. *Special times*: birthday, graduation, anniversary, bank holiday, Easter, Christmas, New Year's Eve, funeral etc. etc. etc.

Exercises:

- Find examples of the When from your experience in which there are strong contradictions, sharp oppositions, deep contrasts, funny discrepancies
- Choose one time, timing or sequencing and weave your personal narrative in it. Produce a scene or an episode around it.
- Tweak the time properties of the Im-Personal narrative:
 - Slow it down
 - Speed it up
 - Give it synchronicity
 - Give it a time warp
 - Insert a deadline
 - Give it wrong timing, with comic or tragic effects
 - Manipulate time and give it unpredictable dreamlike qualities

THE WHO: Traps of character

The scriptwriting Who deals with the properties of character and characterisation. Look at a narrative and pay close attention to the way it deals with these settings. How crucial are the choices of characters and their physical, mental and social characteristics for the overall dramatic action? Are they crucial enough? Would the action be stronger if it was given different characters and characterisation? Are the settings of character and characterisation active dramatic traps?

It would make things easier to divide the traps of character into three categories: Physical Character, Mental Character and Social Character.

Physical Character

Here are a few general examples of physical character which contain a strong embedded sense of contrast and contradiction and can function as dramatic traps:

Invisible man
 Girl in boy's clothes
 Priest wearing high heels
 Fluffy toy kitten monster
 Deaf, dumb and blind pinball wizard
 Little big man
 Wolf in sheep's clothing
 Two faced
 Tattooed lady
 Bull in a china shop
 Uncomfortable in one's own skin
 Young man in old man's body
 Man child
 Tall, dark and handsome mysterious stranger
 Lady is a tramp
 Dressed to kill
 Devil in disguise
 Average Joe
 Plain Jane
 Eye candy
 Pregnant man
 Fit as a fiddle
 On last legs
 Mutton dressed as lamb
 Scarface
 Off colour
 Sex bomb
 Alive and kicking
 Behind a painted smile
 Bright eyed and bushy tailed
 With child

Written all over the face
All dressed up and nowhere to go

Here are some categories of examples of more specific physical character traps. *Species*: Felix the Cat, Dino the Dinosaur, Lassie the Dog who comes home; *Appearance*: attractive, big nose, centrefold, freckled, hairy, naked, short, tall, thin. *Condition*: asphyxiated, beaten up black and blue, hunchback, invalid, with a pressing physiological need. *Fictional characters*: The Abominable Snowman, Killer Tomato Age: adult, baby, child, old person, teenager. *Race*: Indian, Caucasian, Eskimo, Chinese. *Sex*: female, male, transsexual etc. etc. etc. *ad infinitum*,

Mental Character

These are the traps of the emotional and psychological side of the character. Here are a few general examples of mental character which contain a strong embedded sense of contrast and contradiction and can function as dramatic traps:

Damsel in distress
Mad professor
Footloose and fancy free
Trigger happy
Grumpy old men
Cool, calm and collected
Shaken, but not stirred
Sad eyed lady of the lowlands
Singing in the rain
Femme fatale
Achilles' heel
At one's wits end
Babe in the woods
Innocent abroad
Backseat driver
Bad hair day
Bag of nerves
Bar fly
Bleeding heart
Burning the candle at both ends
Wild child
Couch potato
Shedding crocodile tears
Cry-baby
Trigger happy
Eagle eyes
Lonely stranger
Sitting on a fence
Full of oneself
Head in the clouds
Cat amongst the pigeons

Heart of gold
Poker face

Here are some more examples of specific mental traps:
adventurous, aggressive, amnesiac, asexual, bisexual,
cheerful, comatose, confused, depressed, drunk, eager,
fearless, greedy, hesitant, homosexual, humanist, hyper,
idiot, insecure, insulted, hurt, abused, jealous, light-
headed, misanthrope, optimistic, outgoing, happy, paranoid,
persevering, psychotic, righteous, sedated, self-destructive,
self-obsessed, stressed-out, sweetly surrendered, tender and
loving, truly, madly, deeply in love, vain, workaholic etc.
etc. etc...*ad infinitum*

Social Character

These are the traps of social settings of the character like
family relations, occupation, politics, nationality, religion,
social status etc. Here are a few general examples of social
character which contain a strong embedded sense of contrast
and contradiction and can function as dramatic traps:

Poacher turned gamekeeper
Underdog
Upper crust
Born with a silver spoon in the mouth
Black sheep of the family
Birds of a feather
Breadwinner
Prodigal son
Dead man walking
Dyed in the wool
Fat cat
In the red
Religious fundamentalist
New sheriff in town
New kid on the block
Political activist
Sacred cow
Salt of the Earth
Sibling rivalry
Incestuous father
Serving the country
Shotgun bridegroom
Radical nationalist
X-rated
Yes-man

Here are some more categories of examples of specific social
traps. *Occupation*: apparatchik, businessman, butcher, car
mechanic, cleaner, doctor, dog breeder, famous star, fortune

teller, gangster, head-hunter, hired assassin, housewife, immigrant, journalist, lawyer, scientist, millionaire, mountaineer, musician, policeman, politician, prostitute, secret agent, sportsman, tax collector, terrorist, trapeze artist, wine taster, writer, artist etc. *Nationality/politics*: Chuang Tzu, Blaustein, Robert, Kurdish, Macedonian, Papuan, stateless person, lefty, conservative. *Class/ status*: Aristocrat, middle-class, working-class, dirty dozen, gang, magnificent seven, pauper. *Religion*: Buddhist, Christian, Moslem. *Family relations*: brother, father, mother, daughter, adopted child, orphan, legal guardian, step parent etc. etc. etc...*ad infinitum*

Exercises:

- Find examples of the Who from your experience in which there are strong contradictions, sharp oppositions, deep contrasts, funny discrepancies
- Choose one physical, mental or social characteristic and weave your personal narrative around it. Produce a scene or an episode around it.
- Create a "fish out of water" scene or episode
- Exercise makeover strategies. Create conflicting Im-Personal narratives by varying choices of headgear, hairstyle, make up, jewellery, clothes, shoes, personal objects, method of transportation, tools, etc.
- What would your Im-Personal character be as an animal?
- Create and vary the back story of your character: occupation, politics, religion, class, what was the vow your character made when they were 16, what is the name of the character and how important is it, what is the music the character listens to and how important is it to them etc. etc. etc?

THE WHY: Traps of motivation

The scriptwriting Why deals with the properties of motivations i.e. the reasons, drives and desires behind the character's actions. Look at a narrative and pay close attention to the way it deals with these settings. How crucial are the choices of motivation for the overall dramatic action? Are they crucial enough? Would the action be stronger if the character was given a different motivation? Is the setting of reason, drive and desire of the character an active dramatic trap?

Here are a few general examples of motivations which contain a strong embedded sense of contrast and contradiction and can function as dramatic traps:

All in a day's work
In cold blood
Blind faith
Emotional blackmail
Just for the hell of it
An axe to grind
Bringing home the bacon
For a wager
Cutting off the nose to spite the face
Doing the dirty work
Donkey work
Out of pity
Drawing a line in the sand
Drawing the shortest draw
Dwelling on the past
Just going for it!
Earning a living
Eye for an eye
Facing one's demons
Feeling blue
Just for kicks
Crossed wires
Going with the flow
Being a guinea-pig
Having a go
Heaven knows why
Jumping on the bandwagon
Just what the doctor ordered
Keeping head above water
Kicking a habit
Labour of love
Having a last laugh
Last straw
Lesser of two evils
Like father, like son
Losing the plot
Make or break
Matter of life and death
Keeping moral high ground
Paying one's dues
Passing the time
Political correctness
Revenge is sweet
Riding with the tide
Seeing the light
Selling one's soul
Sink or swim
Spur of the moment

Here are some more specific examples of motivation traps: ambition, being pushed or thrown into, by chance, accidentally, in a calculated, premeditated way, competition compulsion, craving, curiosity, dark desire, death wish, ecstasy, fancy, frivolity, fleeing, trying to avoid, for health reasons, friendship, for scientific reasons, generosity, greed, family ties, hatred, mission, hobby, hope, hunger, idealism, in spite of everything, intellectual hunger, romance, intuition, independence, yearning, jealousy, love, power, lust, mania, melancholy, need, nostalgia, obsession, honour, loyalty, obedience, order, out of spite, peer pressure, political belief, professional pride, status, seeking acceptance, safety, protecting one's nearest and dearest, revenge, sacrifice, self-delusion, survival, temptation, whim etc. etc. etc...*ad infinitum*

Exercises:

- Find examples of the Why from your experience in which there are strong contradictions, sharp oppositions, deep contrasts, funny discrepancies
- Choose one motivation and weave your personal narrative around it. Produce a scene or an episode around it.
- Think of a character whose motivation is obvious and visible and who is desperately trying to hide it
- Think of a character whose inner motivation can't be guessed by their outside looks and is in opposition with it.
- Think of a character who is split between two equally strong opposing motivations

THE WHAT: Traps of action

The scriptwriting What deals with the properties of changes, movements, events, happenings and situations crucial for the action. Look at a narrative and pay close attention to the way it deals with these settings. How crucial are these choices for the overall dramatic action? Are they crucial enough? Would the action be stronger if it was given a different set of events? Is the setting of action an active dramatic trap?

Here are a few general examples of action which contain a strong embedded sense of contrast and contradiction and can function as dramatic traps:

One thing leading to another

A stranger comes to town

Kiss - kiss, bang - bang

Accidents waiting to happen
 Adding fuel to fire
 Against the clock
 Airing dirty laundry in public
 All hell breaking loose
 Bad hair day
 Baring one's heart
 Biting more than one can chew
 Biting the bullet
 Burning one's bridges
 Burying the head in the sand
 Opening a can of worms
 Daylight robbery
 The die is cast
 Pursuit of pleasure
 Dog eat dog
 Double take
 Dangerous liaisons
 Getting away with murder
 Going round in circles
 High wire act
 Hitting the road
 It never rains but it pours
 Kiss of death
 Playing with fire
 Practical joke
 Rat race
 Russian roulette
 Pact with the Devil
 Turning of tables
 Taking no prisoners
 The plot thickens
 U-turn
 Uncharted waters
 Vicious circle
 Walking a tightrope
 On a warpath
 You reap what you sow

Here are some further specific examples of action traps:
 accident, addiction, adultery, beauty contest, blackmail,
 brainwashing, carnival, crime, celebration, competition,
 conspiracy, danger, delusion, disaster, detection, discovery,
 flood, earthquake, fantasy, fire, discovery, dream, facing
 death, incest, journey, jeopardy, facing oneself, family feud,
 fate, fighting for freedom, friendship, holiday, illness,
 justice, love, madness, magic, marriage, miracle, mistaken
 identity, mystery, narrow escape, parenthood, race, restoring
 order, revenge, rite of passion, paranormal occurrence,
 robbery, sacrifice, seduction, sex, shootout, sport, starting

over, suicide, survival, temptation, technology, time travel, war etc. etc. etc. *ad infinitum*

The What is also known as Story. A quick look at the thesaurus reveals the definition of story as *account* with synonyms such as: adventure, anecdote, biography, chronicle, epic, fable, fairy tale, history, legend, memoir, myth, narrative, yarn, chain of events etc.

Another generic term for the What is Plot. It is the way in which the story is organized and structured. Every story can have innumerable plots. Plot is the way in which the story is edited, formatted, packaged and presented.

Any contrast, opposite and contradiction can be seen as a nucleus for a story or plot or action. Action is the very structural fibre of the script, its "through line", its backbone. The simplest synonym for action is change: something which takes place between points A to B, a happening, event, journey, incident, occurrence. Here are some standard examples of change, *from - to & vice versa*: rags to riches, life to death, danger to safety, slavery to freedom, war to peace, innocence to experience, home to far away, known to unknown, fringe to centre etc.

In standard dramatic narratives action puts characters under unbearable pressure, they reach a breaking-point, they are forced to make decisions and act. They develop! They *fail* or they *succeed* or they *change*. They move from A to B to Z. The action is the *verb* of the dramatic sentence. It is the sum total of what is happening in the narrative. It is the trap of traps!

Exercises:

- Find examples of the What from your experience in which there are strong contradictions, sharp oppositions, deep contrasts, funny discrepancies
- Choose one action and weave your personal narrative around it. Produce a scene or an episode around it.
- Make a scene or an episode based on the following concepts:
 - Seven ways of _____
 - Seven chapters on _____
 - A Visual Diary of _____
 - Phases
 - How to _____ in five easy lessons
 - My hobby
 - Short, sharp and shocking story
 - Unseen footage of _____
 - Love is _____

THE HOW: Traps of approach

The scriptwriting How deals with the properties of the writer's approach, idea, vision, mode, theme, genre crucial for the action. Look at a narrative and pay close attention to the way it deals with these settings. How crucial are these choices for the overall dramatic action? Are they crucial enough? How does your approach correspond to the nature of the action? Would the action yield different meaning if it was approached from a different angle? Which saying or proverb most closely approximates the meaning of the action? Is the approach an active dramatic trap?

Here are a few general examples of approach which contain a strong embedded sense of contrast and contradiction and can function as dramatic traps:

Accidents will happen
 Adversity makes strange bedfellows
 Blood is thicker than water
 Crime doesn't pay
 Die young and stay pretty
 Divide and rule
 Don't judge a book by its cover
 Every man for himself
 Extremes meet
 Eye for an eye
 If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen
 It's now or never
 Love conquers all
 Love kills, love heals
 Money talks and bullshit walks
 No use crying over spilt milk
 Old sins cast long shadows
 Power corrupts
 Pride comes before a fall
 Stolen fruit is sweeter
 The bigger they are the harder they fall
 The dog returns to his vomit
 The husband is always the last to know
 There's no such thing as a free lunch
 You can't have your cake and eat it too
 You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs
 Where there's a will, there's a way
 Etc. etc. etc... *ad infinitum*

Your approach as the vision and genre of the narrative. It "drives" the script and it gives meaning to it. Here are some

more specific examples of traps of approach: funny, humorous, comical, hilarious, ridiculous, sad, gloomy, distressing, horrid, offensive, vile, revolting, sublime, bitter-sweet, solemn, serious, grave, stern etc.

The dramatic material has no fixed meaning. Any plot, character, or dialogue can be turned and tumbled and given different meanings. Dramatic meaning is not to be found in the material itself. The dramatic material receives meaning through the way you handle it and with the *vision* you give it as author, actor, director or audience.

The five basic dramatic modes are *tragedy, melodrama, comedy, farce and tragicomedy*.

Exercises:

- Find examples of the How from your experience in which there are strong contradictions, sharp oppositions, deep contrasts, funny discrepancies
- Choose a How approach and weave your personal narrative around it. Produce a scene or an episode around it.
- "Drive" the meaning of your Im-Personal narrative by changing the point of view from tragedy to melodrama to comedy to farce to tragicomedy.
- Retell the narrative by using different formats:
 - A documentary
 - A dance for children
 - An experimental performance

Scriptwriter's Block Busters

(put yourself in these situations and create a scene about it)

Face an impossible deadline
 Cause a chain reaction
 Fall in love with the hopelessly wrong person
 Undergo a magical transformation
 Catch a virus
 Be green with jealousy
 Be scared, be very scared
 Be preyed upon
 Be involved in a conspiracy
 Trespass into unknown territory
 Design a practical joke
 Create a real mess
 Indulge in pillow talk
 Get lost
 Abuse illicit substances
 Be caught in the act
 Lose something important

Defy your parents, defy all authority
Begin in the middle
Put your life at risk
Make a citizen's arrest
Dress out of character
Have a near death experience
Go without drink/food/sleep
Speak the unspeakable
Do everything in slow motion
Be terminally ill
Discover who you were in your past life
Look at it through a magnifying glass
Make a pact with the devil
Be someone else: a geek, a super hero, a cowboy, a cosmonaut
etc
Get stabbed in the back by the one you trust most
Enjoy what you hate
Hypnotize yourself
Be a fly on the wall
Gatecrash a funeral/wedding
Rage against: microwave, kettle, hair drier etc.
Go mainstream and do as you are told for a day
Sing everything for a day
Stalk an animal
Lead a Revolution
Fill in your "Judgement Day Self-Assessment" form
Stop making sense
Be homeless
Change your sex
Forget who you are
Find a skeleton in your family's closet
Have an identity crisis
Challenge yourself to the limit

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