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Teaching the “Unteachable”

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When people ask me what I do for living, I tell them I teach scriptwriting. They say: what is that? and I say: it's writing for the screen and theatre. Then there is a short pause. And then, they frown and remark: "Can you really *teach* that thing?" With this comment they pretend they know something about *that thing* which I don't. They put a question mark over my job.

They imply that dramatic writing requires subconscious instinct and intuition and that it depends on natural talent and aptitude. They say it's common knowledge that one has to be *born* to be a good playwright. And, of course, they are perfectly right.

Yet, if I told them I taught mathematics, they wouldn't raise an eyebrow. They would accept mathematics as

eminently teachable. After all they only just survived it at school and hardly understood a thing. So then, how teachable is maths? And is it really any more teachable than scriptwriting? I would argue that huge areas of mathematics are equally "unteachable" and that they also largely depend on the student's instinct and talent. Indeed, you also have to be "born" a good mathematician, or a good hairdresser, for that matter.

But, then again, there are areas of mathematics, which are obviously teachable – like the multiplication tables. Schools require young children to drill these tables, endlessly, "no questions asked". It seems to be universally accepted that learning the multiplication tables by rote is the obvious prerequisite for venturing into the more complex ("esoteric, musical, artistic?") areas of mathematics. Likewise, it is essential for a trumpet player to do a thorough study of the simple brass instrument before they can handle the immense complexities of the sounds it can produce. Also known as music.

The recognition of scriptwriting as an academic discipline has been a slow process. All of the other arts got there first. Royal Academy of Arts boasts it can teach painting, Royal Schools of Music and Drama proudly vow to be able to teach music, acting and dancing. But Scriptwriting has still got some way to go. Oh well! Let's just keep in mind the fact that the English Honours degree was not established in Oxford until 1894. Presumably it was deemed unteachable until then. Or simply not worth

teaching. Or both.

Scriptwriting is like mathematics or playing the trumpet; a large proportion of it is unteachable and it would ultimately depend on one's muses, circumstances and luck. But then the craft of scriptwriting can be taught, learnt, exercised, measured, evaluated and analyzed. The objective study and exercise of the craft can certainly help the subjective, subconscious and mysterious artistic process. Students and lecturers meet in schools and Universities under an agreement, indeed a contract, that *this* is a distinct possibility.

One of the reasons for the suspicion against scriptwriting could be that it lacks an obvious *instrument*, a tool with which it could be practiced and exercised. Sportsmen and dancers have their bodies as instruments, they exercise and flex their muscles, cooks exercise with utensils and food ingredients, musicians play their musical instruments, composers work with notes and scales, mathematicians work with numbers and calculators. And they all have their objective regimes of exercises and exercise tables and exercise books. And they all have a pretty good idea about what they must exercise for eight hours a day if that want to become masters of their discipline.

But playwrights? What are they supposed to exercise with and how should they go about it? What is their instrument? What are the tools of their craft? In your first driving lesson, you get into a car and make yourself familiar

with the driving wheel, accelerator, brake. In your first music lesson, you look at your instrument and make yourself familiar with its stops and keys. The doctor has objective instruments with which to check the patient's temperature and blood pressure. Even an electrician has a circuit-tester, a little screwdriver with a little lamp in it, to find the "live" wire. Yet, poor students of playwriting are usually given pen and paper and asked to go and create. Small wonder many of them don't know where to start from! They twiddle their thumbs and complain of writer's block even before they've become writers at all.

So, what would a scriptwriting instrument look like? How could scriptwriting be exercised and what could be its exercise book? What are its primary numbers and multiplication tables? What are its building blocks and basic ingredients? What are its - notes?

The language of the Internet is made of binary opposites, of zeros and ones in zillions of combinations. It's funny to think and hard to believe that all of my digital music and photographs are deep down just clusters of numbers.

All of western music is defined by the twelve note scale. There are only twelve notes between any octave, after which octaves simply repeat all over again. These same

notes go into jazz improvisations, folk songs and classical symphonies, kinds of music which seemingly have nothing to do with each other. The notes are few but the variations are endless, as are the different modes of composing.

By the same analogy there is only a very limited number of categories of food: fruits, vegetables, cereals, meat, dairy products, spices, water and...that's pretty much it. With these seven types of ingredients you can cook each and every dish and recipe under the sun.

The classical Greeks drank the very same water as we do. It was H₂O for them as it is for us. Yes, it is rather ancient but we don't call it old fashioned, clichéd or stereotypical. We are thirsty, we drink and it tastes good all over again.

I strongly believe that there are basic ingredients in scriptwriting as there are in cooking and music. I urge my students not to try to invent new food ingredients, but to exercise new ways of cooking. As did Shakespeare and Bach. As does Tarantino.

Over the years I've been involved in researching and teaching the "notes" of scriptwriting. Screenwriting is primarily visual storytelling. You don't *write* scripts, 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 mismatches. These binary oppositions are dynamic units containing potential dramatic energy, tension and friction. They are potential dramatic traps i.e. elementary script-building blocks.

There are six fundamental tools with which anything and everything can be turned into an active dramatic trap and given endless variations of meaning. These are the six inexhaustible paradigms of potential scripting matter: the Where (i.e. traps of place, space or location), the When (i.e. traps of time, timing or edit), the Who (i.e. traps of character or characterization), the Why (i.e. traps of motivation or drive), the What (i.e. traps of action, plot or structure) and the How (i.e. traps of approach, vision or genre).

These basic settings can be endlessly exercised and combined with each other. The idea is not to offer formulas, but exercises of form. Not to preach recipes of “how it should be done”, but to allow students to create their own connections and permutations. They realize that sometimes powerful dramatic meaning can be scripted not only by the presence but also by the absence of certain settings. They

find out that sometimes tweaking of clichés and subversion of stereotypes can produce unexpected and explosive new meanings.

Craft is not to be taught for its own sake, but so that students can use it and challenge it in new and creative ways. It's like studying the laws of gravity to enhance flying. It's like exercising the physical limitations of the body in order to achieve an impossible dancing move or break a sporting record. Students are encouraged to push the teachable craft towards its unteachable limits, beyond its boundaries – to turn it into art.

The description of my job, and of the jobs of all of my colleagues at FRTV for that matter, is to enable and oversee this transition: that the craft is challenged and surpassed, used as a jumping pole, as a trampoline, as a scaffolding behind which the students build their practical projects. When we are lucky, and I'm happy to say it does happen quite often, we can see in front of our eyes how students master their craft and magically transmute it into art! We are witnesses to their transcendence, their learning leaps, their challenging of boundaries and forging of new connections.

The old adage says that students should surpass their teachers, go beyond them and eventually raise the question: "What does the teacher know?" This interaction requires patience and care. It is a delicate process where every little word counts and can make a huge difference.

Here's an example. The daughter of a friend desperately

wanted to be an actress. From an early age she took part in all school plays and was deemed to be talented. She then went to an acting school. They did “Midsummer Night’s Dream”, a play she had done at school and thought she knew a few things about. When she raised some questions with the lecturer about her part, the lecturer tapped her on the head and said “Think less and be more physical”. The young woman was devastated. She left acting forever and she is now in the legal profession. She’ll probably carry the artistic trauma with her all her life. One line by one teacher changed the course of her life. We are literally in the business where words can kill or heal.

When I was a young boy, I desperately wanted to learn to ride a bike. My elder cousin, whose bike it was, would hold the saddle from behind and run after me. I would spend many days trying and falling off and getting my knees bloody. I put up a passionate and stubborn struggle. I still vividly remember the moment when I turned round and saw my cousin far behind – he had let go of me. I was on my own, riding a bike. A mystery had happened! I learnt a precious skill which has stayed with me ever since. I went beyond a boundary. And I keep going beyond it every time I sit on a bike and mysteriously keep my balance, over and over again. To this day my cousin claims he taught me how to ride a bike. But I say, what does he know? Yes, he was there for me, but it was my desire to learn and it was my knees which bled.

Riding a bike is a dynamic thing. You have to keep

moving to keep the balance. Just like daily teaching. Going beyond boundaries is not something which happens once in a blue moon. Teaching the unteachable is not a metaphor of an imaginary ideal. It is a standard required for the daily grind of creative teaching.

I've always liked the political, poetic and hip slogan of the sixties: "Be realistic! Demand the impossible!". To me this always sounded like a teacher's war cry: "Be realistic! Teach the unteachable!"

If politics is the art of the possible, then surely art is the politics of the impossible. Shouldn't the teaching of it, be likewise.

Ludwig Wittgenstein had elaborated: "What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence". In other words: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." To this, Franz Urbach added: "it is only here that speaking becomes worthwhile."

When we apply this to teaching we arrive at a pregnant paradox: only the unteachable is worth teaching. It is only here that teaching becomes worthwhile!