

Warsaw, Chicago, and Greek Tragedies

by

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A-2-A: Can create an original work of art, explore its relationship to artistic form, and reflect on the creative process.

Background:

Though the focal point of my professional training had centered around performance studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, The Piven Theatre Workshop, The Audition Studio (Chicago), Player's Workshop of Second City, and the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York, my background is in creative writing. My earliest publication was a collaboration of poetry: *Four Star Daydream* published in 1983. Several subsequent publications followed: *The American Collegiate Poets' Anthology*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Polish Daily Zgoda* (Chicago), *Red Shoes Review*, *Chicago Magazine*, and *Ratusz* (Magazine of the President's Office, Warsaw.) In the mid-nineties, I served as the Chicago Cultural Ambassador to Warsaw, Poland. In this capacity, my poem KATARZYNA received First Place in the categories of Writing and Performance at the 1994 Warsaw Festival of Literature. Later that year, I was awarded a Star Citation for Poetry at the Emerging Artists Project, Chicago. Some professional theatre performance highlights include: THE BROKEN BRIDGE, directed by Mr. Habib Tanvir, founder and artistic director of the Naya Theatre, New Delhi, India (in conjunction with the Chicago Actors Ensemble), The English National Opera, Wisdom Bridge, Interplay Theatre Company, The Lyric Opera of Chicago, The Circuit

Court Jesters (National Touring Company), and several other productions with the Chicago Actors Ensemble, of which I was a performing company member. I have also appeared in several independent short and feature films, most notably: SOLSTICE, SOMETHING BETWEEN US, ANDREI'S ARIA, FINISHING POEM, THE BOX, and WOMEN IN DISTRESS. Though my short plays have been showcased at the Chicago Dramatists Workshop, my co-written screenplay GET RICH was produced by the Union Pier Group, and was an official selection at THE NEW YORK INTERNATIONAL INDEPENDENT FILM FESTIVAL in 2003.

Describe the experiences:

I began writing and performing original poetry during the infancy of performance poetry in Chicago. These were the days before the popularity of the Uptown Poetry Slams at The Green Mill, and even before the now-famous Chicago poet Marc Kelly Smith (creator of the Poetry Slam movement) began running with the idea (Aptowicz, pg 35-36). In these early days of Chicago performance poetry, taverns, coffee houses, and other venues competed for thirsty poets' business and foot traffic. I performed many poems at Club Dreamerz, The Three Arts Club, Café Voltaire, Get Me High Lounge, No Palace Studio, The Artful Dodger, Lizzard Lounge, The Green Mill, as well as the Chicago Cultural Center, The Chopin Theatre, Barbara's Bookstore, Puddin' Head Press, Bucktown Arts Festival, Around The Coyote, and Printers Row Book Fair. I also read alongside Michael McColly, David Gecic, Michael Warr, Marvin Tate, Christopher Stewart, and many founding members of the prominent community-based literary organization Guild Complex (<http://guildcomplex.org>).

It was also through these connections that I was persuaded to participate in the "Poem for Warsaw" contest which was being co-sponsored by the Neutral Turf

organization and the Chicago Sister Cities International Program of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs. The competition involved several rounds of reading and performing original work against other poets. Twice a week for several weeks, each winner would move up in the ranking and perform against the winners of other groups. The semi-finals were held at the Three Arts Club in Old Town, where five finalists were chosen for the final competition at Navy Pier. After winning this prize and being named the Chicago Cultural Ambassador to Warsaw, I traveled to Poland and competed against Polish poets at the Warsaw Festival of Literature. After receiving 1st place there a few months later, I was asked to perform my poems at other venues in the city. In my role as ambassador, I had the esteemed pleasure of meeting the Mayor of Warsaw, Dr. Stanislaw Wyganowski, where we discussed the similarities and differences in our cities over afternoon tea. Topics of discussion included education, creativity, and on-going cultural exchanges.

I also had the opportunity to meet with prominent Polish poets such as Adriana Szymanska, Ludmila Marianski, Krzysztof Karaski, Andrzej Szmidt, and the famous Polish writer Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski at the Department of Letters and Literature. The Warsaw Department of Cultural Affairs also scheduled on my behalf many private meetings with the actors and artistic director of the prestigious Teatr Szwedzka, members of the Song and Dance Company of the Warsaw Politechnik University, the internationally renowned Polish actress Adriana Biedzinska, and arranged for me to observe a closed rehearsal with the world-famous Polish folk dance ensemble "Mazowsze."

But it was the time away from official meetings that really captured the essence

of this cultural exchange. I roamed around Poland with an old friend from Chicago who was then working for a large multinational firm in Warsaw. In addition to him introducing me to a number of other white-collar expatriates from Australia, England, Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Germany, and Spain, I saw the capitalist-side of Warsaw that was emerging. Glass skyscrapers were being constructed next to worn-torn public buildings that were still in disrepair after 45 years of communist rule. Casinos, spas, night clubs, and ATM's quickly sprouted after the fall of the Berlin Wall, making them must-known destinations for cabbies still driving East German-made Trabants. Tequila, scotch and bourbon fashionably replaced vodka as the national drink of the upwardly-mobile Polish, while the unconnected, blue collar factory worker who still held his socialist-party union card seemed to get lost in all the hubbub and whirlwind of changes. These are the scenes and themes that wound up in my journal, and have helped me to develop new works. In hindsight, my writing got better because my life experiences got richer. Both Warsaw and I have changed since then, since life is always changing and never stagnant.

Relevance to Competence:

It was during these years of readings and performances that I observed other artists work, struggle, fail, risk, and succeed which helped me to develop my own craft. These experiences allowed me to evaluate my life and work with a whole new outlook. I began to question and answer everything, which provided a plethora of introspective material to work with. As noted above, Marc Kelly Smith went on to create The Poetry Slam, whose mission is, *“to promote the performance and creation of poetry while cultivating literary activities and spoken word events in order to build audience participation, stimulate creativity, awaken minds, foster education, inspire mentoring,*

encourage artistic statement and engage communities worldwide in the revelry of language” (Poetry Slam, Inc., n.d.). These were the principles that were used at open-mic poetry events before the Slams were officially created in 1987.

In terms of stimulating creativity, writer Simon Firth (1983) once said, “Popular music is always in the process of theft and imitation of all sources and artists” (p. 20). Indeed, for the poets as well. I began to feed from the work of other writers and performers. I began to create original works based on what was affecting me. I began to understand what stirred my own voice, and began to emulate the effective communication channels of others that reached me.

In addition to the writing of original poetry, I gained competence in the performance aspect by taking acting, voice, and movement classes at the schools listed above. Though my study at Chicago Dramatist Workshop did not involve honing poetry skills, it did exercise my dramatic writing as a whole.

Reflection:

I learned, above all else, that people have a need to be heard. I also believe that everyone has the ability to be creative. Psychologist Ellen J. Langer (n.d.) writes, “Those who can free themselves of mindsets, open themselves to new information and surprise, play with perspective and context, and focus on process rather than outcome are likely to be creative, whether they are scientists, artists, or cooks” (Dormen & Edidin, p. 50). I learned how to deliver lines dramatically and effectively. I have also found the perfect distance that a microphone should be placed in front of my mouth. I learned how to reach that private place in my mind and how to convert those feelings into a line of poetry or dialog. In my quest to strengthen my own creativity, I was pointed in the right direction by Margret Boden’s (2004) statement, “Creativity can be achieved by

making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas, exploration of those ideas, or even the transformation of those ideas in people's minds" (p. 2-3). In reflection, Boden's maxim on creativity became the foundation on which I would write.

Ideas:

The majority of my theatrical training was focused on three key acting philosophers, Constantin Stanislavski, Michael Shurtleff, and Sanford Meisner. In varying degrees, all three played a significant role in my understanding of character development, emotional authenticity, and inner motive forces. In his book "Audition," Michael Shurtleff (1978) created 13 guideposts which allow performers to ask specific questions about their characters in order to be prepared for their role. In my presentation of the poem, I used these guideposts to varying degrees:

1. Relationship – How do I feel about this person?
2. Conflict – Why can't I get what I want?
3. The Moment Before – What just happened before I got here?
4. Humor – Helps you cope and connect
5. Opposites – Interferes with what you're fighting for
6. Discoveries – What's new here?
7. Communication & Competition – Give and take, win or lose
8. Importance – Raising the stakes
9. Find the Events – Events equal changes
10. Place – What is your emotional connection to this place?
11. Game Playing & Role Playing – A way of dealing with reality
12. Mystery & Secret – Adds drive and intensity
13. Mischievousness – Involvement with you and the character (Shurtleff, 1978)

In terms of writing, I used simile, personification, allegory, image, allusion, symbol, and assonance which are all elements of the poetic art form (Reuben, n.d.). My work has been influenced by the styles and compositions of Pablo Neruda, Robert Desnos, Czeslaw Milosz, Raymond Carver, and Wislawa Szymborska. In addition, other artists and creators provided a myriad of ideas, concepts, and creative principles that are still

embedded in my writing: Shepard, Rilke, Royko, Stravinsky, Kandinsky, Tzara, Bulgakov, and Cheever.

Application:

The poem, KATARZYNA (Katherine in Polish), was written and conceived within the constraints of the rules of the Chicago Sister Cities poetry competition. The organization held the “Poem for Warsaw” contest to show how Chicago and Warsaw were tied together spiritually, ideologically, and culturally. I decided to build a metaphorical bridge, by using my grandmother as my connection to both cities. I also chose to use a flexible narrative structure with free verse form so that the poem may be read or listened to as a conversation. Listed below are examples of how I used the poetic elements listed above in the piece:

Simile – “brown spotted forearm take various shapes, like a dance”

Personification – “Maybe she will go back to stand on the moist grass of Lasienki Park and peer into the statued, haunted eyes of Chopin”

Allegory – “with every new ingredient she cleanses”

Image – “and softly cradles my adolescent face within the virgin cure of her breast”

Allusion – “That first day of September had brought to the pond distant sounds of sirens and bombing”

Symbol – “She talks, and we listen to mazurkas”

Assonance – “the cold and ghostly Past”

The work:

Katarzyna

Katarzyna is living in a suburb now. She's
gotten away from the city
untouched
upon the completion of her
twenty-eighth year at Stewart-Warner.
She and I used to take walks
near Belmont and Milwaukee,
facing the early morning crowds of men
in neighborhood taverns
and delicatessen-bound churchgoers,
finally reaching her bank
where she'd deposit her labor
camp pension checks from Germany.

She tells me how much
I remind her of my father,
and how much she misses the city:
The two female musicians who lived
in the two flat on Crystal Street, but
most especially
the spring walks in Humboldt Park
which reminded her of the *spacery* she'd taken
during her courtship in Warsaw.

I had never met Katarzyna's husband,
but I had always imagined Francis,
my grandfather,
as a poet.
A strong, thick-legged potato farmer
whose wit lured
the young accomplished pianist from Warsaw,
with his stories of Greek Tragedies and dreams of
exotic foreign cities.
I had imagined them
sitting on dewed grass, overlooking geese-filled ponds,
and dancing
mazurkas on cobblestone parkways in the warmest of rain.

Then everything stopped.

That first day of September had
brought to the pond distant
sounds of sirens and bombing. The two
had separated and promised

to meet in a specific city from
Francis' dream.

When I think of that time and
what it was to real, living people, I
stop myself from wondering what she and two children
had done to be spared.

Through my squinted eyes, I see her
scrub vegetables for the barley soup
she promises me.
The tattooed numbers on her
brown spotted forearm take
various shapes, like a dance, with every
new ingredient she cleanses.

She talks now of going back.
"Is different now, *kochany...*"
Perhaps it is. Maybe she will go back
to stand on the moist grass of Lasienki Park
and peer into the stoned, haunted
eyes of Chopin.
Now changed,
I also look back at the cold and ghostly
past. Shaking off the frost,
I embrace its new warmth.

I am alone
in these thoughts of
Warsaw, of Chicago, of Greek Tragedies, and
geese-filled ponds.
Katarzyna silences my curiosity by whispering
a Polish lullaby, and softly cradles my adolescent face
within the virgin cure of her breast.

She brings
the dinner to the table where I sit with old
photographs of Uncle Roman and Aunt Helen's
wedding at Holy Trinity.
She talks, and we listen to mazurkas.

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