



Your Name Here:
An Actor's Guide To Developing
Your Own Solo Play

by Susan Merson

YOUR STORY ARC

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One is counseled to write what one knows, but even at that time I realized that what I knew might not have amounted to much and even if it did, was there anyone who would be interested? So, I began the process by listening to Diana's questions. Where were the turning points in my artistic life so far? Who had been the impetus for these turning points? How did these turning points relate to each other? If these turning points were clear, coming from a particular world, could they be seen as universal? Were my questions passionate enough to allow other people to ask them as well?

HOW DO YOU GET THERE? BUILDING THE STORY FROM THE BASICS

These questions were most important to me as I began my writing journey. But, how will you get there? Let's start slow and steady. You may find this section elementary and it is meant to be. We are starting once again from a place of knowing nothing. And we will see if we really have a story to tell.

BUY A JOURNAL AND A BRAND NEW PENCIL

The first step is defining the specifics. Take a look at your life and start a personal journal. You need to start observing yourself and see what themes begin to emerge. Find some paper right now. Nothing fancy. An old notebook or the back of a script will do. No one will see these scribblings. They are all yours.

BLURT BLURT BLURT

Begin to think about moments that affected you deeply in your life and using the first person, begin to write these stories down. Just as simply as that. Don't think too much. Just find the first phrase—like once upon a time--- and move on from there. Enjoy the way the pencil moves across the page. It's part of the fun.

“Once upon a time I fell in love.

I won a beauty pageant

I lost a spelling bee

I received a pornographic telephone call

Don't worry about punctuation or run-on sentences. You can perfect everything later. Much later. For now, get an image in your head and let that image take you on a ride.

‘Once upon a time I fell in love but I felt like I was swimming in pea soup—

“I won a beauty pageant but never felt so exposed or ugly....

“I lost a spelling bee on a really simple word. I froze. All I could see was alphabet soup and I-----“

“I received a phone call from a slimy voice asking me why I had looked so beautiful in my photo in the newspaper. I was 11 years old.”

LET THE HEAT RISE

Hold on tight and let that image be strong, just like a bronco that is trying to throw you. Let the first idea come and find a second half of the image that is in direct conflict with the image that came before..

“My teeth sank into a gorgeous chiffon tart and they hit something that moved.”

“I escaped into the shower, turned on the water, and a rusty red substance started flowing from the tap. Was it blood?”

Heighten the conflict, increase the heat and get your teeth into it. Now, allow your character to react to the conflict that was created by the images in conflict.

The more these images want to throw you off, the more you find a reason to stay on and ride them through to the end. The bucking bronco is the conflict, the thing that goes wrong in your story, and that element that you need to resolve in order to finish the tale. Did this work for you? We can try another approach.

FIRST, USE YOUR EYES

I like to suggest to my students that they start their writing process visually.

Try this. Draw a picture of the house you grew up in. The outside of the house first. Make sure the windows are in the right place. Are they covered? Are any of them open to the breeze? Do you hear anything coming from them? Is the front door open? What season is it in your drawing? Does it affect the way the house looks? Now, creep up to a window and look through. What do you see? Describe it and write it down. What does it conjure? Notice if you tell your story with an “I” or a “She/He.” Peek into every window or door that seems inviting. Any thing to report to yourself? To us, the audience?

Maybe your journal reads something like this:

I look into the front door and can see the tiles in the vestibule. They are clean and reddish like earth that has nothing to do with the Midwest. I remember when I caught my grown up cousins kissing there and their kisses echoed round and round just like the WOWEE ZOWEE in a comic strip.

There’s the stairs going up to the my bedroom—I used to slide down them on my bottom watching my image in the big gold mirror with angels on top of it as I descended. Thump. Thump. Ow! Carpet burn on chubby legs....

And those horrible glass bloc bricks that I could never see through. I always felt like this must be what it felt like in prison. Seeing light but never being able to see images. I hated it.

And the phone table. Where I called Terry S. to take me to the movies at my father's urging. And the number was BROADWAY 37868 and I was sure it was an omen that our phone number and my life goal were the same.

The wrought iron banister--- that my huge orthodox Grandfather used to grip as he came down the stairs to start the holiday Seders wearing a white bathrobe and chef's hat. It was his idea of a white yarmulke.

NOW, YOUR HEART

Go back to your drawing paper. And draw the house again, this time just the floor plan. As you draw this diagram, close your eyes and imagine yourself in each room. Write down one sound you hear in each room. Someone crying? An animal barking or purring? Laughter? Whispering? Screaming? Boring conversation? Connect that sound with a story, an event that happened in that room. Write that event down.

FOR INSTANCE:

ROOM: KITCHEN

SOUND: water running

MEMORY: A bloody cut from a kitchen knife rendered my 15-year-old brother speechless. Did he do it on purpose?

ROOM: DINING ROOM

SOUND: the tinkle of china cups in the mahogany cabinet

MEMORY: My father had sat there for days saying nothing. Only the sound of the tinkling china signaled when he adjusted his position or got up to pace.

ROOM: DEN

SOUND: My Dad snoring and the sound of the football game

MEMORY: sleeping on my daddy's stomach as he snored, feeling like I was sleeping in a rowboat

ROOM: LIVING ROOM

SOUND: The dog panting and crying

MEMORY: The dog suffered terribly from distemper and my tough father held him so tenderly as he swabbed the animal's nose and spoke to him in a mixture of Yiddish and Greek.

Then, place yourself in the room next to the one that has an event happening, overhear the conversations, and see if it has anything to do with you. Is there anything you discover that you didn't already know about your family, the people in the rooms, the

memories that still live there? Observe with all five senses in mind. Sight, touch, smell, hearing and taste.

EXAMPLES:

I sit in the kitchen and listen to my parents argue about whether I am smart enough to make it in the private school nearby. I stare (SEE) at the kitchen tile chattering like chilly teeth, mocking me and can HEAR the sound of my childhood record Billy and the Bat. "You're nothing but a nothing," sings the Bat to Billy. I TASTE the remnants of the bread and butter I shouldn't have eaten because I'm on a diet yet again and SMELL the greasy gravy from the pot roast that spilled all over the stove. I try to wipe it off but it FEELS like an invisible coating that will never let me get to what is underneath.

Finish this paragraph? Remember to add the five senses.

I lay awake in bed, listen to my sister weep, and hear the sound of three doors slamming one after the other.
