More Than A Name

I think we’re on dangerous ground when we assume that performance texts, no matter how personal they seem, offer a reliable image of any given writer’s life. A performance text is always in some ways invented, a construction. This resource comes from performance studies, but it is easily adapted for other disciplines.

I find it useful to ask students to write a list of all the names they are known by, and to think about how they came by these names; to consider how our different names make us feel, and how they make us behave; to consider too which names best describe or define us.

Writing projects tend to emerge pretty smoothly out of this, because once we start thinking about which version of ourselves we are dealing with, and which audience we might be writing for, we are already a long way towards constructing a text based around identity. Conversations about differences and overlaps between self and identity come out of this.

Physicalisation also emerges, because we start to think about the ways in which the names we are called suggest the ways we are seen. Proxemics comes into this, because we might naturally wish to be closer to certain people who have ‘named’ us than others, and sometimes for very different reasons.

To add a little formality, I often develop this by asking students to write a narrative based on a significant moment that happened to them under one of their particular names, and to do so without using the letter ‘e’, and without getting around this by misspellings or writing phonetically. There are several precedents for the use of lipograms in literature (though fewer in performance). As with any exercise, this can be developed, and any aspect can be denied: in a performance this may encompass instructions such as no downstage movements; no looking at spectators; no speaking unless accompanied by a movement; or no volume above a whisper.

I often find that concentrating on what they are being denied makes it easier for students to avoid feeling overly indulgent in terms of the content of their writing, so that the formality of the exercise allows the content to flow.

On many occasions this approach has resulted in work that links with Augusto Boal’s* ideas of forum theatre, so that the writing and acting out provides an opportunity to revisit the past and, through the work, to identify power relationships and to explore ways that things could have been different, and so might perhaps be different in the future.

That is about how I’d describe this exercise. It is easier to do than talk about, because what’s at the heart of it is that students are able to bring their own agendas to the fore.

*There is a basic description of Boal’s ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forum_theatre.