

Spontaneous writing: co-creating a play

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose a way of systemic work through art and specifically through theatrical practice in order to prompt this kind of creative writing called *spontaneous writing*. In the Improvisational Experiential Theatre method that I practise, spontaneous writing is prompted by theatrical improvisations. The writings of the group members compose a play, which is brought before a theatre audience.

Systemic practitioners often use writing in their work with people in order to help them to express themselves. Spontaneous writing which aims for the creation of a theatrical play triggers the group members to release their deeper thoughts, their feelings and their body, and to express themselves mostly poetically. It creates the space that helps them to connect with society, writing about social issues that touch everyone. And when these persons, who are not actors, present their own play on a stage, they see themselves as protagonists in their lives and at the same time as active members of society.

I hope that this paper will motivate systemic practitioners to use the art, in any form, in their work with people.

Citation Link

Περίληψη (Greek)

Σε αυτό το άρθρο, προτείνω ένα τρόπο συστημικής δουλειάς μέσω της Τέχνης και συγκεκριμένα μέσω της θεατρικής πράξης, προκειμένου να προκληθεί το είδος της δημιουργικής γραφής που ονομάζεται *αυθόρμητη γραφή*. Στην μέθοδο Αυτοσχεδιαστικού Βιωματικού Θεάτρου που εφαρμόζω, η αυθόρμητη γραφή κινητοποιείται από θεατρικούς αυτοσχεδιασμούς. Τα κείμενα των μελών της ομάδας συνθέτουν ένα θεατρικό έργο, που το παρουσιάζουν στο κοινό.

Οι συστημικοί επαγγελματίες συχνά χρησιμοποιούν τη γραφή δουλεύοντας με τους ανθρώπους για να τους βοηθήσουν να εκφραστούν. Η αυθόρμητη γραφή, που έχει στόχο τη δημιουργία ενός θεατρικού έργου, κινητοποιεί τα μέλη της ομάδας να απελευθερώσουν τις βαθύτερες σκέψεις τους, τα συναισθήματα και το σώμα τους, και να

εκφραστούν σχεδόν ποιητικά. Δημιουργεί τον χώρο που τους βοηθά να συνδεθούν με την κοινωνία, γράφοντας για κοινωνικά θέματα που τους αγγίζουν όλους. Και όταν αυτοί οι άνθρωποι, που δεν είναι ηθοποιοί, παρουσιάζουν το δικό τους έργο στη σκηνή, αισθάνονται πρωταγωνιστές της ζωής τους και ταυτόχρονα ενεργά μέλη της κοινωνίας.

Ελπίζω ότι αυτό το άρθρο θα κινητοποιήσει τους συστημικούς επαγγελματίες να χρησιμοποιούν την τέχνη, με όποιο τρόπο, στη δουλειά τους με τους ανθρώπους.

They told me not to look!

And I didn't.

They told me not to speak!

And I didn't.

They told me not to listen!

And I didn't.

They told me not to move!

And I didn't.

They told me not to think!

I tried not to.

They told me not to dream!

I didn't even try.

And I stood up and looked and listened

to a sunray

and spoke to it and went up and hugged it.

They told me not to be afraid!

But I did get scared.

They told me not to be angry!

But I did get angry.

They told me not to be sad!

But I did get sad.

They told me not to fall in love!

But I did fall in love...

with the sunray.

I did adapt!

But I never stopped thinking about,

dreaming of,

falling in love with...

the sunray.

I fed it, nurtured it, turned it into a Sun!

I wrote above text as an introduction for the viewers of *A crack that turned into a window with a view*, a theatrical performance written in the winter of 2020 by three women, during the Covid-19 lockdown or quarantine. In Greece, the quarantine lasted for 7 months, November to May!

We use a method which I have developed, called Improvisational Experiential Theater, starting in 1995 when I was trained in the method of Theatrical Writing and Practice, in Paris, with Zarina Khan, philosopher, actor, theatre and movie director. Since then, there have been many who accompanied and “collaborated with” me (some of them are mentioned in the references) so that this method could evolve and arrive at its present form. In that period, I “met” systemic theory and I was trained in systemic therapy in the Laboratory for the Study of Human Relations in Athens. A few years later, Smaro Markou and Peter Lang introduced me to the Systemic Appreciative Approach. This way of thinking, as well as the scientists and the writers I “met” during the following years, influenced my work in theatre and the way I relate to people.

This form of Improvisational Theatre that I practice is experiential, meaning that the participants write down their personal thoughts, feelings and experiences. Secondly, it has a structure: people don't improvise on stage. The workshop members choose the subject they want to explore and in weekly meetings over a period of six months, through theatrical improvisation and spontaneous writing, they create their own play which, after two or three months of rehearsals, they bring before a theatre audience. Starting from “scratch”, from an idea, a word, they express themselves, share, interact and, at the point where they intersect, the stories are woven together and a play is created. Thus people write down a part of history, of the daily, human history.

Against all odds, Zanina, Katerina, Niki and myself, we decided to continue with our meetings through a screen, on skype. Each one in her room, in front of the PC or her mobile phone, would stand up and participate in each improvisation, watching the others on the screen. I, in my own room, wrote down

their words. And after each improvisation, each of the three, wrote down spontaneous thoughts and feelings born out of the action, out of the experience of improvisation.

It was far from easy. Imagine a person in a room standing and playing a role, in dialogue with another who is not there, except for their image on a screen. There was no contact, no touch, no shared emotion that connects us when we occupy the same physical space. The screen between us was a great divide. At the same time, though, it gave us the opportunity to “meet”, to share, to dream together, to feel less alone. This need, as well as the openness the four of us had in common, made us look forward to those two hours every Friday night.

It wasn't until the end of May that we were able to meet in person in our little theatre, in order to join our texts and build a play about the reality of ordinary people during the quarantine. The play premiered in September 2021 in a small theatre that was full of people wearing masks. As some said afterwards, *“With the mask on, you couldn't see the smiles of joy and satisfaction you made us feel. Maybe you could see some of that in our eyes.”*

I cite some extracts that I think are representative of the play we created, having the permission of these three women. Actually, when I informed them about this article, they were excited to share with others our work and their texts. In the way we co-exist in these workshops, there is no antagonism. There is trust and respect. We all believe that this is a collective work and everything belongs to everyone.

K. Time passes. A binary system. Two states. 0-1. There's nothing else. Wires connecting. I need to make it on time. I need to find the code. 120 characters, or else, the system cuts you off. Static. A muffled sound. The system freezes and the countdown begins. It never gets to zero. I will never find out what happens when it reaches zero. I feel so safe in here. I don't want to listen to anything. How safe this obsession is! I am not human, I have no senses. I am a robot. I execute the order. 0-1. Two states. Two only. Existence or nonexistence. Isolation. Straightforward things. No complexity at all. No cool air on your face, no sun warming it. Inside a box. Life? Someone else makes decisions for me. Until I get unplugged. I am a machine. I am the cog in the machine.

Z. All of a sudden, a frozen pause! Empty arms. Disappointment.

N. The body becomes rigid. I am unable to move! I look down to my arms and they are vacant. They have no reason to exist. My body is captive. I am scared. Loss and fear... Loneliness! I don't like this change. I am frightened by this feeling of loss and restriction.

K. And just as I was rushing to get everything done, suddenly... PAUSE! Relief! How nice, to have stopped running! The days pass, however, and relief turns into anxiety. Until when? Not to hug, not to touch, to wash my hands thoroughly and many times over. The eyes take on the role of hands, that want to hug, the role of the smile, that can't be seen under the mask. I will be patient, until all of this passes. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to stand it, what with this unpredictable, indefinable cover over us like a dark cloud. I will wait... For how long, I don't know... I, too, have become a part of that unpredictable, indefinable thing.

Z. Monotony! I come and go without meaning, without any contact. Trapped in robotic motion. With time passing, the burden grows heavier. Faces are glum, sad, frightened. I pause mid motion to check if there is any change. Nothing! Like toy soldiers, we take our orders from the fear that has seized us. I look for a few notes of joy, a smile here and there, but unfortunately, we are all moving to the same tune.

The dialogues below are recorded verbatim from one of our online meetings

- Z. *Seriously now, we'll be making theatre on skype?*
- K. *Can you see me?*
- N. *I can't see any of you.*
- Z. *Wait, let me join you on my mobile.*
- N. *I don't see you.*
- Z. *Say that again?*
- K. *How about now? Should be alright now, no?*
- Z. *Huh? What the..? What's this now? I can only see one of you at a time.*
- N. *(->K.) We can hear you but you have no camera.*
- Z. *It says no signal (-> N.) Come on, get a move on!*
- K. *This is torture!*
- Z. *Now, it's just me... Ah, there's one of you!*
- N. *(text message on the mobile) Guys, my PC switched off. I'm coming back in.*
- Z. *We'll wait for you.*
- N. *It shut down again. There must be something wrong with the computer.*
- Z. *Can you connect on your mobile?*
- N. *Yes, I'll try that... Fixed it. I'm looking but I can't find us.*
- Z. *The code is 'atelier 2020-2021'. Wait. First, I need to let you in.*
- N. *I'm in. Can you see me?*
- K. *You missed out on what we've been saying all this time, but there's no time now.*
- N. *Guys, we try and try but we keep drifting apart.*
- K. *Technology was supposed to be great, right? It brings us closer, or so they said. What they didn't say is how much it can let us down.*

- N. *At first, this Internet business was brand new, cutting edge. Now, it's just so frustrating!*
- Z. *We can talk, though with no contact. But we're not giving up. What's important is that we need to get together, even if it's through a screen.*
- K. *Yessss! I'm happy that we're all here together, even if "here" is just the computer screen. Together, we can make it. "Together" is what's important. You can struggle all you want on your own, but no matter how strong you are,, there comes a point when you run out of steam. "Together" changes everything. Don't let me go on. It will just sound banal!*

- Z. *With time, the distance between us grows. I feel so sad to be keeping you at bay, not letting you hug me!*
- K. *What's a life worth with no hugs, I wonder! The loneliness grows. Will there ever be an end to fear? Will hugs be forgotten? What if we do forget them and stop asking for them? Will we be the same after that? I do hope this need persists in every human being. And that, slowly, we'll stop feeling like scared turtles, we'll become human again, standing upright and walking tall. And hug each other!*
- N. *Online communication lasts for moments, but the loneliness inside for eons. When will we ever be free again, I wonder?*
- K. *When will we be let out of here? I can't stand it any longer! Still, there's joy! Through the eyes that shine, the hands trying to connect. The sensation has become a memory. "Once we're out of here, we're going for a few drinks, alright?" We hug tightly and sway as if we're holding each other. We're not giving up. We get one another... wordlessly. Our souls touch and there's power in that, that's the essence of together. We'll make it through this!*
- Z. *I can hear you, even though you are voiceless.*

- N. *Spring is here!*
- Z. *Yeah, so? What of it?*
- K. *I want to get out of the house. I can't find myself here. I constantly feel that there are people looking for me. And, once we're done here and the computer's off, how do I get out of the room? How do I put a different "hat" on? A door opening takes such little time! It's not enough for me. I NEED MORE TIME FOR EVERYTHING, I THINK. How has time become so small and precious?*
- N. *I've been inside the house for such a long time! I am counting the days. Day by day I am drowning, suffocating. I need to breathe again. I miss human contact, I miss touching, hugs. I am tired... Today I am going out. I am sinking, I can't do this anymore. I am mounting a rebellion.*
- Z. *Are you for real?*

- K. *You are right, but the risk's just too great.*
- Z. *We, all of us, want to go out, but we need to comply. There are rules.*
- K. *Maybe there comes a time, when, no matter how much in agreement with the rules one may be, one stops following them. Maybe that's when creating one's own life starts. I don't know...*
- N. *I know it's not right to lead you astray but this isolation is plunging me into alienation and loneliness. I feel like my dreams are falling apart...*

- Z. *We are on balancing on a thin edge. How long is one supposed to stand the vacillation?!*
- N. *I've been stranded so long on this edge, stuck. The ground feels uneven, as if walking on nails. Whatever this is, we are making our way in it, like we have so far.*
- K. *I like the edge. I don't care how tortuous and wearisome it is, there's power in it. The power that brought us here, is pushing us to keep moving. If we manage to balance between the two extremes, the two opposing forces, we might be able to reflect, to get to know ourselves, to gain wisdom of our own. This middle line, with its moments of struggle and moments of hope, it needs time, not forcing. It's an opportunity to clear things out, reconsider and redefine. It's an opportunity to pause... To stop here, midstream and listen, listen hard. Until the next edge....*

Spontaneous writing can be prompted by any trigger, an event, a conversation. It can be undertaken by anyone, alone at home, or anywhere else (Wright and Bolton, 2012). Yet, in my experience, when it takes place in a stable group, in a space that feels safe and the prompt is a theatrical improvisation, something all participants experience together in the here and now, then, the writing is richer, more authentic and it expresses all the wisdom to be found inside every person. Spontaneous writing after an improvisation is an act of reflection, the narration of a moment of life, from the perspective occupied at that particular moment. It's telling a story through relating and dialogue, as it was lived in the course of the improvisation.

In the course of the 27 years since I started developing this technique, I have facilitated more than 50 workshops and directed as many performances of the plays written by the participants, on a range of subjects. Dozens of people have been through these workshops, young and old, some staying for a number of years, and always the groups were replenished, with some members leaving and others joining. They all generously placed their riches in my hands. They gave me their hand and we walked together. I cannot say who was guiding whom. But my hands were never empty. They were always full with laughter, tears, hugs, anger, pain, love.

During this journey of many years, the process and the relationship I shared with every individual and the group as a whole, enabled me to shift from insecurity to trust. In real life, I think, we all learn to feel safe through controlling situations. We need to know what's happening, where we are heading to. Yet, in life we almost never know what the new day will bring, especially in these times of transition we are going through. And the workshops on theatrical writing and performing work are a thumbnail of life (Brook, 1993, 2008).

It took several years and conscious effort on my part, to manage to allow more and more space to the group members for me to be able to trust them. It is very hard to start a workshop that has as a specific goal, a performance open to the public, and not to know where it will end up. When the coordinator tells the members an idea, a suggestion, the circumstances and the roles, in order to develop an improvisation, unavoidably, has something in mind. Then, the group takes it in a completely different direction. The coordinator needs to have the openness necessary for accepting something different and tolerance to uncertainty, as regards the kind of play that will be written. She/he/they needs to operate from a place of not-knowing, and curiosity, too, and that will lead you to the next improvisation (Anderson and Goolishian, 2008; Lang and McAdam, 2016; Selman, 2015). And so, the exploration continues of the self, the other, and the subject which the group has taken on.

All you need do is remain connected with them with respect and appreciation for what of value they have to contribute to the collective text. Because every person does have something good, something beautiful to contribute from their experience, knowledge, their own sense of things.

*“Maybe, finally, the issue isn’t the dirty city,
with which I am slowly learning to reconcile,
but what’s inside, what exists as potential.
And when the potential rises from the depths where it’s imprisoned,
It will be easier the potency of the dream,
for the dream itself, to rise up”.*

(text by a member from the play *Breaking the Silence*, 1996-97)

At the beginning of a workshop, I never study anything about the subject picked by the group, precisely so that I can be open to their thoughts and ideas, so as to be able to explore the subject on equal terms with them. In this manner, I have also had many responses on subjects that we have worked on such as violence, time, beauty, chaos, turnabouts etc.

Once people feel this equality, trust and acceptance, then, they open up and write truly spontaneously, from the heart. Every year, in the workshop’s first meetings, new members write texts based on logic alone, dry and without emotion. That is because our social training overemphasises reason, devalues emotion and ignores the participation of the body (Bakhtin, 2000; Madison, 2018; Bateson, 1972). We are all aiming to become a huge brain.

Along the way, as they experience this freedom, lack of criticism and acceptance they start to let go, to trust themselves and their self-expression through writing (Lang and McAdam, 2016). I make it a point of telling them: *“Don’t think before you start writing. Put pen on paper and let it go. It knows what to write.”* Then, writing comes from the subconscious, from where all the senses meet, from that deep well that contains every necessary piece of knowledge, all the wisdom we share as humans, without being consciously aware of it. Those are well and truly right who say that art connects the conscious with the subconscious and that is the beauty of it (Bateson, 1972; Shotter, 1999, 2012).

It is important to recognise that what helps in spontaneous writing with the method of improvisational theatre, is the body's participation in the improvisation. The body possesses its own senses, its own memory and forms a complete picture out of everything we experience. In writing about an experience, as I notice, we combine spirit, soul and body. This creates a sense of completeness.

It is interesting how everybody has learned to move in a specific way, which results in inflexibility (Madison, 2018; Marshal, 2001). When it is necessary for different parts of the body to move in an unfamiliar way, usually the answer is, "*I can't do it.*" In my experience, given adequate time, people realise that the body is capable of doing a great many things but the mind refuses and restricts the freedom of movement. Just because that's what it has learned. But once the body is free, so is thought, and a different perspective is made available.

Ten or twelve years after commencing on this journey, I noticed another aspect in the way I operated as workshop facilitator to do with the way I connected with people. Many times during the course of the two-hour work, it was as if I took some distance from what was happening in the space, looked at the participants without seeing them, listened hard without actually hearing them and let myself hover in an inner sense of the space, the participants and what was taking place between them. And suddenly, I sensed something ineffable, invisible and, at the same time, very powerful, that existed beneath the words and actions. As if this was a deeper meaning. When I shared it with the others, they also recognised it and connected with it. We were thus able, all of us together, to move to the next step. There is an excellent description of this way of working by Lynn Hoffman (2002).

It was exciting and inspiring when a few years after this observation, I read John Shotter writing about the '*witness-thinking*' and '*witness-writing from within living moments*' (Shotter, 1993, 1999).

I think that's what it's about, this boundless togetherness people can have, which makes it impossible to distinguish between what belongs to you and what to another. With time, I realised that the spontaneous writing in these groups is neither individual nor collective. It is a text written by one person, within whom, however, exist all who were present in actual life, or in books and, even more so, all those present in this moment with whom something was shared during the improvisation, that is being written down. This concept is explored extensively by Gregory Bateson (1972), Kenneth Gergen (2009), Soyini Madison (2018) and others. Later, I also heard a member say, when congratulated for her texts, that these weren't her own, they belonged to all the members. So, then, I would call this practice *relational writing* inspired by Gail Simon (2012, 2013).

Ever since then, this has always been my method of working, and of relating, and I never stop exploring ways of connecting with people and things around me, that are not circumscribed by the skin encasing my body (Bateson, 1972; Madison, 2018). As my experience and my readings show, this method is also transferred to the groups with which we work.

To conclude, I need to mention that spontaneous writing takes on a different power when the group shares it with an audience at a particular time and space, on a stage. This sharing imbues it with a social dimension, as "actors" and spectators are connected through the emotions and the senses, opening up their spirit to new perspectives and possibilities (Madison, 2018). It is then that we speak of *catharsis*, or the collective shift of people sharing similar concerns and the contingencies and turbulence of a particular period (White, 1995, 2007).

At the same time, as I have experienced this work, by transferring their personal narrative on stage,

every actor-member sees their life as art with themselves as protagonists. They can thus find their place in life.

The whole world is a theatre

And I have a place on the stage, that belongs to me.

As you can imagine, although it was me who wrote this text, I had my hand held by all the people who trusted me all these years, as well as everyone whose articles and books accompanied me on this long journey.

As a closing, here is the text I wrote as an introduction to this year's production, *White-black and red lipstick* written by four women, to do with the dependency on mobile phones and social media, and its repercussions for communication and human relationships. The play premiered in June 2022, in the *Cosmos Theatre*, Athens.

Conflict of two worlds

Whole generations come to life inside of me

How many do I draw along in my footsteps?

They mobilize my hands, my thought, my gaze.

A mistress of extremities.

Safe within binary states

The conflict in me, around me, everywhere.

What is right, what is wrong?

I am tired of choosing.

I can't stand any more losses.

I want to be with, to exist together.

What's happening in me traverses the universe.

Should I speak? Will anyone listen?

I am tired of intervening in a continuum.

I cannot fight with what I cannot see.

I look in the mirror.

What is it I see?

A soul? Where is the pulse? Silence!

A number?

A statue?

A human turned to stone!

Is this my own mirror?

How did I get here? Where did I take a wrong turn?

To unknown directions...

... they're clashing inside of me.

Are the times dire or is it me?

I traced a line of dialogue to join them.

So I could exist in between.

So I could move my limbs, stand, listen hard.

I don't want to be anywhere.

I want to be myself, upright, together.

On the edge?

It conceals a trap...

... that I might fall in love with reflection!

Or is, perhaps, conflict better?

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