

# THE HEART OF DRAMA

In the Play of Life script-polishing technique, the line between art and life can be whisper thin. RACHAEL TURK goes through the process step by step with its practitioner, Helen Carmichael.

If drama is, as the old adage goes, 'life with the boring bits cut out', then Helen Carmichael's Play of Life gives the 90-minute edit.

Praises for the scriptworking technique, which involves the selection and role-play of miniature objects, has been sung by the likes of Andrew Bovell, Jimmy McGovern, Jo Kennedy, Clara Law and producer Lynda House. The process is deceptively simple: a space is marked out and a conflict defined, within which the coach leads the client – who in turn takes the miniatures – through a process of question and answer. The rest is, whilst by no means arbitrary, open to interpretation; a unique 90-minute journey of creative resolution.

If this sounds too much like personal therapy, it's not far off. In fact, the same technique can be applied to general creative life-coaching sessions as script development. Developed by Argentinean Dr Carlos A. Raimundo, the Play of Life derives from psychodrama and action methods originated by the Romanian Dr J. L. Moreno. It was inspired by not only his love of drama but his observation of the way children learn their way in the world through play. The therapeutic benefits of this and other expressive methods, and potential for creating behavioural change, has been widely documented.

By understanding the dramatic elements of a particular situation – and its possible resolutions – the basis of a story is created.

'Your session is your story in a three-act structure, and I'm the guide for that journey,' says Carmichael. 'In it, as in the story, you'll find a theme, obstacles, which you'll grow to overcome.' This technique is, therefore, a process by which a personal experience or understanding of a given situation can be harnessed into literary form; from the 'felt' to the 'seen'.

Carmichael notes there are two journeys in any character arc: what the character consciously wants and what the character subconsciously needs. Where these two paths meet is, of course, the dramatic climax.

'This is the point where the character might say, "I thought I needed to win this race but what I really needed to do was to learn to love," and what they do with that will depend on whether they transform or not. A tragedy is where someone doesn't transform and a happy ending is where they take that knowledge and change their life.'

The process of enactment brings about the creation of a dialogue, by impelling the writer to take on multiple points of view. The most crucial aspect of this is, says Carmichael, to feel each character's unique emotion. That is, to build empathy.

The human brain is divided into three separate neurological configurations, each devoted to different areas of life but intrinsically connected. The hypothalamus maintains the body's status quo through blood pressure, breath cycles, body temp and fluid balance. The neo-cortex, or 'thinking

brain', is the basis for strategy, planning, reason and language. Somewhere in between them is the limbic system, the seat of emotion.

Normally when we do something we only use one of those brain functions at a time. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that the limbic system has the power to override feelings. Which might be another way of explaining 'writer's block'.

In the Play of Life, you're involving all three brains at once: your reptilian brain, as you are asked to breathe and move around the space; your neo-cortex, as you make representations; and your emotions, as you give voice to your feelings. It's in the alignment of all three that new insight is released.

'Stuff comes up that you wouldn't normally be able to express and why we see things that we don't normally see,' says Carmichael. 'And at the same time you're able to work at arm's length; a writer, like God, looking down at the story unfolding.'

There might, then, be some truth in the clichéd writer pacing the room, using action to liberate, or rather *activate*, blocked thought and emotion. Also interesting is the fact that under these conditions of a session, according to Carmichael, it becomes almost impossible to lie.

Carmichael's journey to this form of practice was itself an intersection of two paths: a decades-long career in storytelling and a lifelong interest in healing.

Having grown up in Perth in the '50s and '60s, Carmichael's 30 years of practice in the film industry is testament to her artistic conviction. 'Being an artist in any culture, by definition you are the outsider and being an artist in Australia is even worse. It's not a culture like Italy that bonds with its arts or sees the importance in it. I once read an article which said that being an artist in Australia is a bit like being a plant in the desert: chances are you will die but if you do manage to survive, the flower you produce will be extraordinary. Growing up in WA, certainly I found very difficult. I felt like a foreigner.'

A freelancer in radio and children's television, animation and documentary, and a scriptwriting lecturer at AFTRS for more than 20 years, she has assessed for the Australian Film Commission (AFC), Special Broadcasting Services-TV (SBS-TV), Pacific Film and TV Corporation and Australian Broadcasting Tribunal as well as the Australian Writers' Guild (AWG). She has organised international seminars on copyright and screenwriting for the Australian Film TV and Radio School (AFTRS), the AWG and the department of multicultural affairs of the Prime Minister's office as well as cultural exchanges between the AFTRS and the national film school in Rome, where she taught during 1994. In 1999, she was invited to curate the Australian section of Italy's international film festival, AntennaCinema, and is a published poet in both English and Italian. And she dances a mean tango.

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THE MOST CRUCIAL ASPECT OF POINT-OF-VIEW IS TO FEEL EACH CHARACTER'S UNIQUE EMOTION, SAYS HELEN CARMICHAEL (INSET); CARMICHAEL PICTURED (MAIN PIC) IN YALLINGUP, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 1975;

Above all, she is highly intuitive and has a gift for seeing through to the heart of the people she meets. She is an accredited life coach and counsellor, working with people who wish to make their own life experience, quite literally, a work of art. When she speaks about her craft, her eyes light up. ‘I’m interested in people and how they can live better and more creatively,’ she says.

It was a combined talent that did not go unnoticed by the Australian film industry. In 2003, Carmichael was invited to apply her skills as a creativity coach to the inaugural SPARK script laboratory in 2003. Since then the Sydney-based script counsel has undergone attachments to the European script laboratories Souces2, North-by-North-West and Pygmalion, and in 2005 was invited to give a presentation on her work at Berlin’s Script Forum. In January of this year she worked with graduating filmmakers of Amsterdam’s Binger Lab.

Given that it already involves role-play – in essence, acting – Play of Life is innately suited to writing for the screen.

‘I work with painters, photographers, musicians and designers as well as writers, producers, editors and directors. But for screenplays it is really applicable because you’re dealing with characters first and foremost and I believe that your character is destiny. When I was studying and practising astrology, years ago, that was my belief: that if you knew your character, you knew your destiny, and I believe the character in the screenplay is what makes the story.’

The practice lends itself to the theory that all writing is in some way autobiographical. ‘The whole psycho-dramatic tradition as I understand it believes that within us we have everything and we need just the right set of circumstances to bring out a character; it is as if we are made of

millions of different characters, different roles and a set of circumstances will bring out that role.’ As Joseph Campbell would say, we’re each a hero of a thousand faces.

Sometimes in the writing process, Carmichael warns, the character itself can take over. ‘Linda Agran, British producer of the famous series *Minder*, used to work the way I did when I was a producer; she didn’t tell writers what to do, she’d get them in and say, “What are you interested in? Let’s have a chat...” They’d agree on the basis of the story and she’d say, “Go off and do a first draft and come back and see me.” One writer brought her a first draft and said, “What do you think?” and she said, “Well it’s a fabulous screenplay but *Minder* doesn’t appear in a single scene!”

Not surprisingly, the technique works best when participants are prepared to take risks and prepared to work hard. And, like life itself, it’s a constant process. Clients might revisit the same problem months or even years later. Or address new challenges that arise once old ones have been overcome.

Biological explanations aside, there is something unfathomable in the method and, even having done a session, I still don’t know exactly how it works. Personally, I was surprised at both the depth of story it can construct and emotion it can evoke. How does one go from Lego men to climactic catharsis? How does everything fall into place just as the ninetieth minute ticks over?

At this point even Carmichael smiles and shrugs her shoulders. ‘That’s the magic of it!’ she says, that twinkle in her eye. ‘Can you ask a composer “Where does that music come from?”’ 🎵

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