

BURNED HEART

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By

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ABSTRACT

Burned Heart is a performance memoir that grew out of my desire to take a language-based approach to playwriting. Specifically, the structure is dialogic in that the performance uses a number of strategies that range from polyphonic voices to the use of found, or borrowed, elements. These strategies developed organically while referencing (and resisting) my practice as an established poet. With respect to the theme of *Burned Heart*, I set out to explore the characteristics that some adults develop as a result of childhood experiences related to the breakdown of family structure. As someone who grew up in the shadow of divorce, I was interested in merging specific memories with contemporary research, particularly the work of the late American psychologist, Dr. Judith Wallerstein. Her career was shaped by a twenty-five year longitudinal study that investigated the effects that divorce has on families. Growing up, I was told (and believed) that my parents' divorce would not, and did not, affect me. Wallerstein's study, and the work of others, affirmed for me that divorce does indeed spell long-term consequences for the children involved. *Burned Heart* is set as a mindscape. The characters, staging, costumes, lighting, and props represent a married woman's exploration of the aftershocks of a traumatic event. I reached for dreams, ghosts, historic characters, and fractal memory to build the thirteen scenes that constitute *Burned Heart*. The title is wordplay on one of the names of a central character, the famous French actress Sarah Bernhardt, who lived from 1844-1923 and makes a return in this dramatic work.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Burned Heart is a 90-minute performance memoir that employs language-based playwriting strategies to explore an event in a woman's life that prompts her to question her hard-won happiness. I chose to consider happiness from the perspective of a married woman with a history of divorce in her childhood because the breakdown of family structure is shown by researchers to have consequences that extend far into adulthood. Thus, the driving impulse behind *Burned Heart* is an exploration of the lifelong aftershocks of a traumatic event. This Artist's Statement is organized in two parts. The first part considers the playwriting strategies that I used to build a structure for *Burned Heart*. The second part addresses the intersection of memoir and language.

By way of background, *Burned Heart* is set within the mindscape of the main character's fitful dream. It is written for four actors who portray ten different characters. The main characters include the following: Rosine, a sixty-something woman who re-visits various stages of her life; Sarah Bernhardt, the famous French actress who lived from 1844-1923; Dr. Judith Wallerstein, the noted American psychologist who lived from 1921-2012 and pioneered the first long-term study on the effects of divorce on the children involved; and James, a sixty-something man who is married to Rosine.

The writing strategies that I used to develop *Burned Heart* grew out of an intuitive and organic writing practice. I read plays and contemporary research about the effect of divorce on children and was influenced by the work of American psychologist Dr. Judith Wallerstein, primarily her book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-Year Landmark Study*, published in 2001. I kept notes, taped interviews where I assumed the role of both interviewer and subject, transcribed the tapes onto large sheets of sketch paper, highlighted connections between images and ideas, and then turned to the work of drafting thirteen scenes.

I learned that *Burned Heart* is a dialogic play after I began to read about playwriting theories. In the book, *New Playwriting Strategies: A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting*, the term is defined by author Paul Castagno as a play that is "...fundamentally polyphonic or dialogic rather than monologic (single voiced). The essence of the play is its staging of different voices or discourses and, thus, of the clash of social perspectives and points of view....Internal dialogism refers to the play's capacity to interact within itself, as if the various components were in dialogue with each other" (Castagno 9). He notes that the term was developed by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin as a "means to reevaluate certain nineteenth-century Russian novels that could not be categorized into traditional genres. These hybrid novels juxtaposed sophisticated literary techniques with storytelling elements drawn from folk culture, while other texts featured an array of linguistic styles, dialects, neologisms, and slang" (2). The dialogic play is

characterized by a wide range of techniques but for illustrative purposes I have chosen only those that best serve the structure of *Burned Heart*.

It didn't take long to come upon a device called interruption because this is how I broke up continuous speech and impeded "the easy access of form and content" (10). Without the use of interruption, an extroverted character like Sarah Bernhardt can launch into exposition that works to the detriment of the play in terms of energy and pacing. So all of the characters — Sarah Bernhardt, Rosine, Dr. Wallerstein, and James— often (but not always) interrupt "the previous character's through-line. Interruption causes the audience to refocus attention, to work at "getting it, in a sense" (10). Legions of playwrights use this device but I found British playwright Caryl Churchill's use of interruption especially instructive, particularly in her play *Top Girls*. Published in 1982, *Top Girls* provided me not only with characters who speak right through another's speech and interrupt each other but I also found speech that follows on from a speech earlier than the one immediately before it. The device is a brilliant representation of how people talk (without listening). In *The Art of Subtext*, Charles Baxter refers to this type of character as a self-dramatizer. "Self-dramatizers know that people are looking at them, but what they're not good at is paying attention to others. They command your attention by speechifying and turning spotlights in their direction, but they rarely listen carefully; they've lost the gift for it....they often don't know what world they inhabit, which is why their emotions can explode unpredictably—" (Baxter 73). Due to the shifting inner world portrayed in *Burned Heart*, the use of self-dramatizers was an especially effective strategy.

I learned that I had created equivocal characters. That is, the actors for this performance must have the "capacity to switch or transform from one character into another and back again " (9). Rosine, for example, shifts voice and body language when she moves from adult to teenager to child and back to adult. Sarah Bernhardt also plays Rosine's mother, while Dr. Wallerstein also plays Rosine's younger sister and the social worker.

Another device that I used involved found or borrowed elements, defined by Castagno as the "use of text imported ...from elsewhere, as opposed to materials that are created to conform with the consistent genre" (9). Thus, I limited my reading about Sarah Bernhardt to *only* work that she had written, despite the hundreds of secondary sources available. I wanted only her voice in my head, her language, her phrasing. I then added several stories from her life — how she slept in a coffin to experience death; and how she was once flattered by an Italian chambermaid. The following lines from Scene 10 illustrate the way that I occasionally wrote dialogue for Sarah that I found in, or borrowed from, her life story: "...returning one evening from seeing me in Phèdre, (she) said: "Oh! Madame was so lovely that I didn't recognize Madame!"

I constructed *Burned Heart* as metadrama, a technique best described as intuitive and organic. The construct arose from knowing that Sarah Bernhardt was both an actress and a drama teacher. It seemed apparent to me that Sarah would believe that she had been summoned by Rosine to perform as both an actor and as a theatre teacher. She would therefore take to the dream as if it were a stage where she had full reign to act, teach, and direct. Metadrama functions in the same fashion as a “self-referential literary element or device that exposes the machinery of the play....” (Castagno 11). In *Burned Heart*, Rosine takes a turn as director, James doubles as the lighting technician whose lines are delivered from off stage, props come and go in full view of the audience, and both Rosine and Sarah reference the presence of the audience in the opening scene of the performance.

Framing is another “metadramatic technique utilized to change a spatial or temporal setting. In practice, framing is related to a narrator who ‘sets the stage’ for a theatrical or dramatic event. (It) shifts levels of ‘reality’ in a play and draws attention to the structure. Other elements such as sound, setting, or lighting can serve as frames” (10). The play, *It is Solved by Walking* by Canadian playwright Catherine Banks, offered me a blueprint with respect to staging. Banks divided the stage into three areas, including an interior place where Margaret, the protagonist, creates poems and where the poet Wallace Stevens appears to Margaret. From Banks’s staging, I gained an understanding of how I might stage the inner workings of Rosine’s mind. Thus, the decisions I made with respect to sound (rain, thunder, a pin dropping), light (shifts in mood, shifts in weather, shifts into deeper interiority), and props (white shirts become dresses become clouds become egrets) were selected to capitalize on the physicality of theatre.

The dialogic structure described above suggests that *Burned Heart* departs from the traditional treatment of conflict, a central protagonist, and character-specific dialogue. Instead, the emphasis is on the push and pull, or interactivity, between voices. Yet underlying this is the decision I made, as the playwright, to incorporate personal memories. I think that *Burned Heart* can stand alone without the inclusion of the word memoir in the descriptor but I think that I run the risk of misleading the audience if I fail to include this term.

But why memoir and not autobiography? I wasn't interested in drafting a chronology of events in one voice. Memoir, I discovered, offered me the potential of an "examination of self," as Sue William Silverman states in "The Meandering River: An Overview of the subgenres of Creative Nonfiction" (Silverman 190). It occurred to me that I needed to reach for ways to tease meaning from the psyche. Thus, I pushed the interplay of voices that appear in Rosine's mind: dream images, ghosts (her parents, Bernhardt, Wallerstein). Of course, the entire apparatus is tethered to metaphor because we are in the realm of memory and this is how memory expresses itself. In *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness*, Don McKay writes: "No wonder every strong metaphor carries with it a whiff of *déjà vu*, the sense of memory regathered. It seems to invoke not just the particular remembrances but memory itself, huge and empty as a resonating gourd. Such oscillation – push forward, recoil back – interrupts the movement of the sentence; it creates place within the temporal rush of syntax" (McKay 72). I believe that this syntactic rush prompts the literal use of interruption, something that my characters do in every scene.

The performance of *Burned Heart* is as self-conscious as the machinery itself. Rosine is in the throes of a fitful dream and therefore possesses a dreamer's awareness, or sensitivity, to sound. She believes that she hears someone shuffling in the audience and feels worried that the shuffling indicates that she's being melodramatic, that someone "out there" might think she's behaving like Sarah Bernhardt. This becomes the trigger that sets the performance into action. Bernhardt appears in Rosine's mindscape. Yet even Bernhardt is self-conscious, never once letting anyone forget that she is the "the great" Sarah Bernhardt, the Divine Sarah. The entire stage is cast into a state of change that is ongoing, shifting, and dynamic. Nothing is fixed. The characters on the stage are in fluid motion, suggesting that neither memory nor experience remain the same. I think this is especially important in the context of a performance where I draw from memories that defy any accurate or fixed truth. In fact, some memories belong to me, others I borrowed, adapted, or reinterpreted to suit the illogic logic of the psyche.

In the end, I discovered that I had reached for a place of knowing and unknowing, where the psyche works more in the mode of poets who "let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields," to quote Robert Frost (Silverman 194). The guiding impulse in *Burned Heart* was not so much that I wished to state a position about the long-term effect of divorce on children and adult as that the audience will accept "the *emotion* of the piece itself as the essential "fact"" (195).

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