

## Exercise: Voice -- Overheard Conversation from Clem Martini's *The Blunt Playwright*

This is a really good exercise -- and I'm sorry to say much more difficult to do in these Days of Covid. No more hanging out in coffee shops or bars or other areas where conversations happen and you can eavesdrop. But put it in your toolbox. The pandemic will end at some time. Or maybe you are already going to work (an excellent place to overhear things) or other public places . . .

Don't worry about hearing something "dramatic" -- you can work with that later. One of the most interesting examples from a creative writing participant was from Nova Scotia, when a person recounted the conversation over the back fence between their husband and a neighbour -- about apples. Nova Scotians take their apples very seriously -- settlers have been growing them in the Annapolis Valley since the French occupied the Mi'kmaq territory there in 1605. What was remarkable about the conversation was not its banality -- but how these two men were passively-aggressively trying to exert their dominance -- who knew when the best time to pick was, who knew where the best orchards were, who knew where the rare heirloom cultivars were available . . .

From Clem's book:

One of the most essential skills one can develop is the ability to really listen. The creation of good dialogue - and by that I mean dialogue that is effective, active, succinct and distinct - can only be truly learned through listening. Great dialogue is able to capture the nuances, rhythms, and idiom of a variety of individuals. If you hope to achieve this, you must first know how people - people other than *you* - speak. How does one learn this? One way is to go out and eavesdrop.

Start now. Pick up a pen and paper. Travel to a place where you are likely to overhear entire conversations without much difficulty. Cafes with tables pushed close together are good. Buses and subways are terrific. Bars can be excellent, provided they're not too noisy. Sporting events, church sermons, hospital waiting rooms, or political rallies - they can all work.

Sit down, listen, and write. Try not to be intrusive, but attempt to capture **whole** conversations - a snippet won't provide you with as much information. It is important to note what is being done as well as what is being said, and it is wise to make note of the environment and context.

Before you race out with pen and pad, however, let me provide you with some sage advice regarding this assignment.

I knew of one group of students that travelled to a bar frequented by a rather tough crowd consisting of a loose assortment of bikers, hookers, and fences. These students parked themselves at a table and began their work. They weren't entirely certain that they were catching every word so *they drew their table closer*. They sketched a few drawings of some of their subjects so they would recollect the space more completely. Now, Bikers and Hookers can be very sensitive about this kind of scrutiny. In a very short time the students' activities were brought to the attention of a couple of very burly individuals who confronted the students, knocked over the table, and chased them out into the street. I would caution you - *be discreet*. This is not only a quality to cultivate for this particular exercise, but a quality which will help you your whole life through.

## POINTS OF ATTENTION IN THIS EXERCISE.

- a. The intent of the exercise is to make one aware of qualities of voice. How are things phrased by different individuals? How does each person use words differently? Is it possible to determine who is talking simply by the use of their words, and the phrasing?
- b. What kind of language does the group you observed share? Are there terms that they use in a specific and distinct way? What are you able to tell about them from their vocabulary? Are you able to establish anything about their background from their choice of words? Their employment? Their nationality? Their neighbourhood?
- c. On a very basic level, how grammatical is the conversation? Do people speak in whole sentences, or do they use incomplete phrases? Do they finish every sentence or leave some sentences incomplete? How is the conversation shared? Is it equitable?
- d. Become aware of qualities of hierarchy and class. In North America we tend to believe that there is no such thing as class, but a subtle pecking order exists in almost every human endeavour. Some playwrights are more observant of these qualities than others. Harold Pinter, for instance, is especially aware that in the smallest communications, there is an almost invisible hierarchy at work.
- e. Become aware of qualities of intent. Ask yourself, "Why are these individuals talking?" "What do these people want from each other?" Bear in mind that no one ever does anything for nothing - so what are these individuals trying to achieve through the use of all these words?
- f. Become aware of rhythm and cadence. Some individuals speak in long flowing sentences, others use a choppy direct structure.