

1. Tom Savage

Improvisation Module – Part 1

In the improvisation module my group were given two texts 'The family', a painting by Paula Rego and the story of John Tanner and Rachel Mclean. Both texts are widely open to interpretation. The painting is almost designed to leave interpretation completely open to the viewer; you can't quite figure out what's going on and there are many different scenarios that could be taking place. A painting is also just a still image of something, so how the event captured in the picture came about is up to the viewer to speculate, but still shows the outline of a story.

The second text is an actual story, so even though it is fact your imagination can still run free when assuming a perspective of events. Domestic violence is an issue that jumps off the page at you when you first see these two texts. The female characters in the painting are very intimidating and forceful in the way they are positioned and empowered by the lighting and their posture. The story of John and Rachael is predominately based on domestic violence and of course eventually leads to Rachael's death. Relationships are also put to the test in the painting and story. Paula Rego's rather bizarre and disturbing family in her painting seem to be almost bullying what could be the father, but may well be anyone. It is bizarre and disturbing because family is supposed to be the most loving and caring community a person can belong to and to see this situation where one member is essentially being bullied contradicts that harmony. As with the painting John and Rachael are a potentially loving relationship gone horribly wrong.

With these similarities the two texts also differ. The painting is concentrated in one room where as the 'John and Rachael' story is (or could be) set in many different places. There are essentially two main characters in the 'John and Rachael' story and four in the Paula Rego painting, but where there are no other characters to use in the painting many more are in 'John and Rachael' and even more can be created as part of the story. The painting only holds vague templates for characterisation so you can invent personalities and motives for all of them. Contrastingly the 'John and Rachael' story has definite models to follow for the two main characters making them easier to play, but still allows you scope for creativity when taking on the roles and filling in the gaps of their character.

The issues contained within the texts are somewhat similar, but taken on from slightly different angles. They both apparently concentrate on domestic violence or violence within relationships. 'John and Rachael' is a case of John becoming overly upset and in a fit of rage murdering his girlfriend, quite blatantly a man being violent towards a woman in the home. The painting isn't as crystal clear on its issues; it is not 100% obvious what's happening in the scene. It seems like the three women are intimidating the one man; two of them forcing themselves upon him, while the other eggs them on approvingly from the side. However, it is not clear what the two are doing, are they trying to hold him down and smother him? Are they trying to remove his clothes for a vicious sexual attack? Simply scaring him? It's not clear, but it does make you think about family members abusing another, not just physically, but generally, even though the painting is very far fetched.

The painting is somewhat unrealistic. It is painted in with a cartooned aspect to it, which gives it a slightly humorous side; I suppose Paula Rego wishes to remind the viewer that it is a painting, that although it is disturbing it is just art. The 'John and

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Rachael's story is an actual event, a real murder. The story is as real and horrific as they come. There is no way you could play down the events that happened in the story and I don't think you'd want to.

When acting out our four scenes we created in response to the painting we felt it was important when using this art form to employ a lot of dramatic devices and techniques. With the text being a painting we used a lot of still images, sometimes at the start of a scene, but always at the end. We would always finish on a still image mirroring the painting to show how the family in the picture would get into their positions in the painting. To finish on a still image would also always leave the ending to the audience, as in Rego's painting, still keeping the essence of what she wanted her audience to do: think about the issues.

We used quite a lot of dialogue considering the lengths of our scenes. I think it was necessary to use dialogue to explain the situations as each of the four scenarios were so different, though it would have been interesting to try one in mime, something I would do if given the opportunity again. Monologues were also commonly used in our scenes to allow the audience to learn more about/get a better feel for a character they would only see for 30 seconds. Thought-tracking also came a little into play for more immediate and less intimate reactions from the characters.

In some scenes the acting was somewhat melodramatic or exaggerated to reflect the style of the painting; a hint of humour and surrealism to make light of (but never forget) the issues involved. I think we succeeded in pulling off just the right amounts of humour for potentially very tense and frightening episodes. I would like to have explored this further, maybe experimented with masks or make up and used complicated body language to project the messages. We could have approached it from a different angle, perhaps tried to make the scenes seem more sinister rather than humorous with exaggeration and melodrama, but it would be a fine line between exaggerated malice and a comedic, pantomime evil.

We thought the audience would need a break from sinister themes to the scenes so we finished with one that couldn't be more innocent; it is simply a normal family with the mother measuring the father's cuffs, one daughter retrieving some sweets from the father's pocket and the youngest girl saying her prayers. I like this idea as it seemed a quite original and, because of the paintings apparent under tones, quite humorous and ironic as well. Trying to think of the most unique interpretations of something will keep the audience interested and set your group apart from the others.

In our performance of 'John and Rachael' I played John Tanner one of the main characters and the man who eventually kills his girlfriend Rachael Mclean. John is a very interesting character and there are many dynamics to his personality. The only way I could get into John's mind and really become John Tanner was through hot-seating. Hot-seating allows you to realise things you know about your character, but never considered and you often finish surprised at how much you understand the character. On the surface John appears to be simply an evil murderer, but I began to realise that he was a very loving man with serious issues and problems. His love becomes smothering and over possessive. His is clouded with jealousy throughout his relationship with Rachael and hot-seating made me wonder why John is like this. Questions were raised such as 'John, have you had bad relationships in the past? Were you treated badly or unfaithfully by a previous girlfriend?'

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Hot-seating made me wonder what kind of an up bringing John might have had. Were his parents very protective of him? Has he had a very sheltered youth? Thinking about the answers to all these questions gradually helped me to build up a background for John and empathise with him, which is essential for the performance; if you can't understand where the character is coming from then you won't play it properly. I also began to discover how manipulative and conniving he is. This is how the audience need to perceive John, so as well as empathising with the character I also needed to think about how the audience must see John. He is a criminal and a cold-blooded murderer who cares about no-one but himself and manipulates others feelings and morals for his own happiness. The audience must be clear about this or they will become confused. The audience must feel some sympathy for John, but not too much otherwise the issues are lost; it is Rachael we must feel sorry for.

I considered all these directorial points not when planning the scenes or working on a plot, but when I was hot-seated. I enjoyed it very much and think it is a great form of drama. My understanding of John Tanner sky rocketed and I even realised how he drove himself to kill the love of his life. I imagined, while being hot-seated, it would be fun for him to have a sharp changing temper and interesting for John to have violent mood swings from one emotion to the next in the blink of an eye. I even adopted these ideas during the hot-seating, to the surprise of my partner!

It was a very productive and helpful exercise.