Drama and Writing: Complementary Meaning-making Processes

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The drama work took the students outside themselves and their classroom and into unique spaces and places for writing; spaces and places that were imaginary, playful, engaging, and also authentic. (Schneider & Jackson, 2000)

Most of today's writing curricula stress the active use of writing. Writing workshop (Graves, 1983, 1991) and cross-curricula thematic approaches (Tompkins, 1994) have become the norm in many language arts classrooms. These approaches focus on the completion of writing tasks in a systematic manner. I have come to realize that some students need a certain type of stimulation to begin the writing process. In this article I concentrate on the inner compulsion to write, especially while in role during a drama. My need to focus on the use of drama as part of the writing process arose as a result of teaching language arts and educational drama both at the elementary and undergraduate level. These students have helped me revisit the idea that writing needs to be embedded in a context that has personal significance for the writer. When writing is embedded in context, writers use the blank page to begin arranging their ideas and impressions as written expressions. In educational drama, or more particularly, process drama, children create a different world, at a different time, and find themselves as explorers and participants in the action that unfolds.

In this article, I describe and explore writing that arose from process drama in order to show that drama and writing are complementary meaning-making processes. I begin by suggesting that the process model of writing and process drama have similar elements. I then discuss two experiences that helped me understand that drama has the power to engage reticent writers in writing activities. I next focus on one student's piece of writing and discuss how writing in role liberates the child and launches her into another place at another time as another person. In the final section, I look at how students use their newly created voices outside of drama time, and then, I briefly look at the notion of voice that emerges in role creation.

Process Writing and Process Drama

What is the commonality between the process of writing and process drama? In order to answer this question, I look at Grave's (1991) model of writing and compare it to process drama. Grave's model of writing places emphasis on the process of composing and executing a piece of writing more than it does on the final product. He believed that learning about the process of writing is more significant and rewarding because errors are modified along the way. Editing and drafting are key processes in his model of writing. Neelands, Booth, and Ziegler (1993) believe that editing and drafting a piece of writing in process is significantly compatible with the process model of drama. The compatibility arises because in a process drama, teacher intervention occurs throughout the drama's development and new learning occurs as a direct result of the experience within the drama. This compatibility is relevant because during the process of developing the meaning and context of a process drama, students are personally editing and revising their role in the drama (Neelands et al., 1994). Students move from being students in a classroom to different people in diverse environments. Within this new world, students have to become active participants. Becoming participants means that students have to create and recreate themselves as another in order to fully share in the drama. While in role, students can

sometimes be called upon to write. It has been my experience that many children who are reticent to write, write with greater ease and enthusiasm when in role because they have had a direct and personal experience with what needs to be written.

Drama and the Reticent Writer

By reticent or disinclined writers, I mean the two or three students in most classrooms who find writing a challenge. They are students who, after a prewriting activity, still view the blank page as an obstacle. I share two experiences from which I concluded that disinclined writers were less apprehensive about a writing task when required to write in role.

One experience occurred in a Grade 3 classroom in which I experimented with Flynn and Carr's (1994) use of the Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood Story from China by Ed Young. Being a full time graduate student, I was volunteering in another teacher's classroom in a school where I had been the school coordinator the year before. The teacher was new on staff but was eager to learn about educational drama. His Grade 3 students had not participated in a process drama before. My interest was in determining whether Siks' (1983) statement that participating in drama makes children want to write, especially when the experience has stimulated enthusiasm and when students are eager to extend the experience. I did not read the story at the start of the drama but left it to the end. I began by involving the children in many situations that occur in the story. Taking the role of the mother, I left them alone and told them not to open the door to anyone. The classroom teacher then took the role of the oldest child who put them all to bed. While they were asleep, I switched roles and became the wolf knocking at the door. Would they let me in? After many efforts at persuading them that I was not the wolf and to let me in, I still found myself outside. I then stopped the drama and asked them to do something quite dangerous. I asked them to let the wolf into their house. Once again, in role as the wolf, I found myself inside the house and fell asleep in a chair. I stopped the drama and told the children that we would have to decide how to get rid of the wolf. When the drama started up again, I was in role as one of the children while the teacher stayed in role as the oldest child. We asked the children how we could get rid of the wolf. and many suggestions were made. Once again the drama was stopped. We discussed which suggestion to select, and as a group decided to enact tying the wolf to the chair. When the drama proceeded, I became the wolf asleep in the chair and they used their "drama eye" to tie me to the chair. Using their drama eye meant that the students did not rely on props but imagined that they had rope.

After the children had bound the wolf, the teacher and I gave them three options to express their ideas in writing. They could write a letter to Po Po and describe their narrow escape from the wolf, or they could select to be a reporter and write an article from the mother's point of view. The third option was to write a personal journal about their experience in the drama. I had created formatted pages that would help the students organize their selected pieces of writing. The newspaper article page was created with columns, a place for a title, as well as a box for a picture. The letter and journal pages were formatted to represent these structures. Nine of the students selected to write the newspaper article, five wrote a personal response to the drama activity, and eight wrote a letter to Po Po in role as children inside the drama. The classroom teacher was overjoyed to see that his three reticent writers were writing. The students had many ideas and quickly filled an entire page. All three of the reticent writers selected the newspaper

article. Some of the students in the class asked if they could write a letter as well as do the newspaper article. The playfulness of the drama experience had given all the children voices with which to write. The drama served as a pre-writing experience that allowed the students to form opinions, to ideas, and relationships, and more importantly, to learn. From self-discovery and from their active minds, writing flowed (Schneider & Jackson, 2000).

Encouraged by this encounter, I arranged to observe a Grade 6 writing lesson in the same school. I took careful note of how students in small groups viewed and spoke about a picture from *Lord of the Rings*. I noted the length of time it took each student to record some ideas on paper after the ten-minute group discussion. The reticent writers became obvious when after 20 minutes, they still sat looking at the blank piece of paper holding their pens suspended as motionless objects clutched in their hands. I believe that to some extent they were uncertain about the task set, but I also feel that they were ill prepared to write with only a picture and minimal conversation as stimulation.

A few weeks later, I returned to this Grade 6 classroom. I had decided to work through a process drama in order to determine whether in this class reticent writers would be more inclined to write in role. Neither the teacher nor the students had previously participated in this type of drama activity. I read Bash's (1996) In the Heart of the Village to the class. The story is about community life in an Indian village and how an ancient banyan tree is at the centre village life. After the story was read, we sat around a large sheet of paper on which I had drawn a large tree. I involved the students in a collective drawing and each one of us began to determine where we lived in a village that had, as its central focus, a huge old tree. The students created a persona and explained what they did, where they lived in the village, and what period of time they were representing. The collective drawing began to take shape as the students' houses, a school, shops, etc. filled the large rolled out sheet of paper. Once all the roles were determined and stories had been shared about our lives in the village, I suggested that it would probably be a good idea to write about an important incident that made each one of us part of the community. I encouraged them to accept the notion that it would be important to record these stories for future generations. Many personal, and sometimes amusing stories, had arisen during the collective drawing activity. The teacher and I were pleased to see that the students who had been ill prepared to write in the picture related activity were now more prepared to commit their ideas to paper. Many of these writers did not write extensively, but they did have a story to share. Reticent writers created their stories from the verbalization that occurred around the collective drawing. Stories shared were either extended or the student placed himself or herself in the midst of someone else's story. The important aspect is that while in role, the children found the voice of their newly created characters. The blank page was now a place on which to write a memorable story that could be shared with future generations of the village.

These two experiences helped me realize that some students need a great deal of exposure to talk and imaginative creation in pre-writing activities in order to have ideas to start writing. Tarlington (1985) suggests that drama can act as a powerful pre-writing activity because it develops a meaningful context for writing. The imaginative involvement that arises in drama is therefore undoubtedly a powerful stimulus for writing. Neelands et al. (1993) state,

Role invites the student to get over the hurdle of the blank page, to take the risk of putting pen to paper. Students become so eager to get their ideas down they are barely aware that they are writing. They are inside their own stories, moving forward as they write in role. (p. 13)

The drama experiences from these two encounters with reticent writers showed that drama can provide writers with a vital channel to be touched affectively, creatively and intellectually. During the drama, students had an outlet to allow their imaginations to spiral. Cross (1999) reminds us that we must struggle to see things afresh through our imaginations, and believes that both individuals and societies should value imagination more. According to Cross, Berthoff believes that the imagination is not merely child's play; it is central to thinking and writing. Berthoff states,

Reclaiming the imagination begins with recognizing it as a name for the active mind . . . a name for the form-finding and form-creating power. Such a theory of imagination can help us teach writing. . .because it can guide us in seeing how writing is analogous to all other forming. (as cited in Cross, 1999, p. 28)

Writing in Role: A Vision Quest and Biographical Information

In this next section, I explore the nature of writing in role. Writing in role has been advocated by Heathcote (1995) and Neelands et al. (1993) who feel that role provides the child with an audience that is both real and at times fictional (O'Neill, 1995). The lesson I have selected is an interesting one as it provides an opportunity to look at writing in role as well as the opportunity to look at how some children extend their role into other pieces of writing. However, more importantly, this lesson loans itself to a discussion about our need as educators' to be sensitive to the issue of appropriation. I believe that the teacher's use of a European author's voice to guide her students into the life of the early Native people resulted in the children using Euro centric voices in their writing. The voices of Native authors were omitted and therefore the students could only present what they had experienced. The teacher, whom I have known for a number of years, is an excellent educator. A visit to her classroom reveals that her students learn to respect all people so her omission is not one of disrespect but rather one that can easily be made by teachers. Egan (1992) states, "The fictional story is one of the most hospitable environments for thinking of things as possibly being so" (p. 54). He posits that it is through the world's powerful stories that we embrace the human qualities that are described in these stories. He states,

In this way stories are the tool we have for showing others what it is like to feel like we do and for us to find out what it is like to feel as others do. The story in short, is "the ability to exchange experiences" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 83). (p. 55)

When we imaginatively feel what it would be like to be another, we begin to develop a concept about treating others with respect. In order to fully understand others, we therefore need to stimulate the imagination "by a rich and varied stock of stories" as this would encourage greater flexibility in thinking about how things could possibly be (Egan, 1992, p. 56). I begin this section with a story that provides a summary of the first few stages of the drama from which the writing emerged. Following the story, I begin to describe how the teacher used guided imagery to

stimulate her students' imaginations and how they responded to this activity in writing. Later in the article, I discuss the issue of appropriation and voice.

A Vision Quest

A Story

Chief Ray of Light sat poised upon her high stool overlooking the exhilarated group that had journeyed many miles to participate in the POW WOW. She thanked all the tribal members for coming to the celebration and asked them to introduce themselves. I watched as each member stood and shared with the other tribal members a personal story or their spiritual journey to find their spirit guide.

Kathar spoke first, "My name is Kathar," he said, "I remember when I was just lying in the sun with my friends. We were hunting for rabbits and rats. I remember when I caught my first foolbird."

Chief Ray of Light welcomed him to the gathering. After a brief pause, Frendswa stood and introduced herself to the group.

"My name is Frendswa. My symbol is the crossed arrows of friendship. When I was little I did all the cooking. It was hard but somehow I managed to make supper for my mom and my two brothers. I was born in my mother's tipi. My mother was hoping that she would have three boys but instead she had me and my brothers."

Howling Coyote stood and turned to the group. She spoke in a soft voice. "As I fell into a deep sleep I heard pounding music in my mind and then a landscape appearing with cliffs, grass and a moon . . ."

As each member shared who they were with the group, drums quietly played in the background. Chief Ray of light stood and spoke to the people.

(Author, 2002, p. 62)

Chief Ray of Light is Kelti, the teacher, who was the participant teacher in my case study exploring teaching language across the curriculum through drama. The process drama being storied above was created as part of an integrated unit using the social studies topic: Early Native People of Canada. Kelti used Speare's (1983) novel, *The Sign of the Beaver* to help the students begin developing belief in the drama. In the novel, Speare writes about a young Native boy's experience as he goes through an initiation. Part of his initiation is to find his spirit guide by

going on a vision quest. Kelti therefore used this part of the story to guide her students on a vision quest in order to find their spirit guides. Using guided imagery, she led her students deep into a forest where they built shelters, washed themselves, and then fell into a deep sleep in order to ready themselves for an encounter with spirit guides. This activity was created to help the students find a new identity as they entered into the drama. A deeply solemn atmosphere could be felt in the room, and I was pleased to see how seriously the students were participating in the guided imagery activity. The stillness in the room, only interrupted by Kelti's voice and softly recorded playing drums, showed that the students were aware that they were participating in a ritual that is spiritually significant to Native people. I was not sure whether Kelti had spent time on discussing the spiritual significance of the ritual with her students prior to my visit, however, I felt that both Kelti and her students were not participating in a superficial activity but one that the students appreciated as being profound. Finding a name was a crucial part of the drama as the children had to begin to develop a sense of belief about their role as Native People of Canada living a long time ago.

Figure 1: Vision Quest and Biography

The writing in Figure 1 is an example of one child's written creation coming from the first two phases of the process drama. These first two phases helped the students develop the meaning and context of the drama. In this piece of writing, the student has placed herself firmly in role as part of a different community. In the writing titled "Vision Quest" the student began to make a transition into her new role as Eagle Dance. She wrote:

As I fell into a deep sleep I heard an eagle. Suddenly I was standing looking at an eagle soaring through air. Then I was on this eagle watching a tribe dance. Then again I was looking at this eagle. Only then I found my Manitou.

The guided imagery activity helped her move from her present day classroom into a world that existed in the past. Who would she be in this historical world? She had to look at the eagle again in order to discover herself as Eagle Dance. In the second section of the writing, which contained biographical information, the student wrote:

My name is Eagle Dance. I am 8 years old. I live in a tribe called Vision. My tribe believes that both boys and girls should go on a vision quest.

Before beginning to write about their vision quest, students were encouraged to share the visual images they had experienced during the guided imagery activity with the whole class. The oral textualization that occurred was essential to develop these two pieces of writing. Sharing these visions helped the students create a context for the descriptive writing that needed to be completed. While talking, the students were finding the voices of their new personae. The voices of the new characters would exist in the writing. The writing therefore no longer stood alone but became part of the experience for both writing and drama. The students did not doubt their abilities as language users as they knew what they wanted to say and went about saying it first verbally and then in writing. Before writing their biographical sketches, they were given materials to create a headband that represented their new name and were encouraged to use symbols from a Native symbols chart placed on the board in their classroom. The symbols had to further depict who and what they were as Native peoples. While they were developing these new characters, they were involved in creating a three-dimensional model of their tribal village. The modeling of the village spanned a number of days. An important aspect of these activities was that the children were beginning to formulate into small family groups. Each student embraced a new role and accepted the roles being portrayed by the other students. New names were used among the group members. Suddenly, the classroom had a Kathar, a Frendswa, a Howling Coyote, an Eagle Dance, and so on. These names were on their headbands and these voices were beginning to creep into their biographical pieces of writing.

Writing in Role

O'Neill (1995) suggests that when students are given the opportunity to write in role through drama, they can think differently about the forms as well as the content of their writing. Kelti's students were fully aware that they were beginning a journey into a created world and in order to enter this "as if" world, they had to develop personae that belonged to this world. The act of finding a new name already situated the students in another world. The biographical information was one form of writing that positioned each student in the Native community on a more personal level. I remember one child pondering why she would have visualized a fence. The other students helped her to make meaning of the image. One student suggested that it could mean being a secretive person. The Native Symbol chart revealed that a fence represented protection. The processes of creation in the various drama activities are the drafting and revising that I parallel to the writing process. The child is not revising and redrafting the writing, but is revising and redrafting the character in the context of the drama. When the writing is attempted the words for the blank page are available because the students are inside their own stories.

In the process drama, the students could use their imaginations to journey into the situation and let the meanings that grew from the drama become evident in their writing. Neelands et al.

(1993) state that, "when the writing is embedded in a context that has a personal significance for the writer, the motivation for writing changes drastically" (p. 10). The writer begins working in a feeling/thought mode, and explores meaning through both context and form. The students were therefore learning through the writing just as they were learning through the drama (Heathcote, 1983).

Neelands et al. (1993) suggest that both drama and writing are acts of composition. They state that all of "the elements of re-ordering, referring, re-using, and editing can be found in each" (p. 9). The students in Kelti's class shared these pieces of writing with the whole class. The students were aware that they would have the opportunity to share their writing at the POW WOW. The students therefore needed to be clear about who they were. As the children worked through the various drama strategies mentioned above, they were revising and reshaping not only who they were in the drama but who they were on paper. In the story at the start of this section, Kathar and Frendswa are reading a section of their biographical sketches while Howling Coyote selected to read part of her vision quest at the POW WOW celebration. Each student read from his or her writing around an imagined ceremonial fire. Each student had become another person. Revising, editing and creating were fluid processes in both the drama and writing. These pieces of writing were evidence that drama acted as a strong pre-writing activity that provided this particular Grade 4 class a link between speech, the imagination and writing. The entry into a process drama stimulated the students' imagination to write in role.

However, the real strength that I see emerging from the process is that every child willingly celebrated her or his piece of writing as a whole class group around the ceremonial fire. I was reminded of Lensmire's (1994) experience in a writing process activity where children in his study had isolated a student from the sharing process. This student's socioeconomic circumstances placed her on the periphery of her classroom. During the writing process, the class deliberately excluded her from the sharing process. She shared her work with Lensmire. The process drama that I observed had the power to transform students into a caring and sharing community. They embraced each new tribal member by name. I even recall how excited students were about their new names. They used them outside of drama time on the playground. I noticed that during the various drama activities boys and girls worked collaboratively in tribal groups as they created tableaux depicting hunting scenes and various moments in tribal life. The knowledge about the early life of the Native people came from a visit to the city's provincial museum. They shared their experiences and writing over the course of the drama. I suggest that these children were engaged in authentic dialogue, and had become active agents who were thinking and creating for them selves. Shafer (2000) strongly suggests that we need to learn how to educate to humanize and liberate and only if we can make our students capable agents "will we nurture a class of writers who are capable of invention and change, rather than obedience and deference" (p. 30). I see the notion of empowering students as a crucial part of the process drama that I observed in Kelti's classroom. The students were not involved in obsessing over what Kelti wanted. They were involved in the art of creation. Shafer (2000) also comments, "when form controls art, and the teacher refuses - either through fear or ignorance - to share power and learning, students are relegated to performing tasks, to simply completing assignments" (p. 33). Kelti freed her students to make choices for themselves as they proceeded through the phases of the drama. The students were free to use their newly created voices both in drama time and outside drama time to both act and write.

Drama and Voice Inside and Outside of the Drama

In this next section, I briefly address two areas concerning voice in drama. I discuss the children's excitement about their newly created roles and how they used these voices to write outside the drama. The second area involves the teacher's responsibility to provide multiple voices to prepare students to participate in role.

One aspect about embracing a role that surprised me was that some children used their newly created voices outside of drama time. Below, I provide an extract from a Grade 4 student's journal that was being written as part of the social studies writing assignment. It is important to point out that this was not part of the process drama. In social studies periods, the children in Kelti's class had to keep a journal about early life in Canada. Many students embraced the role of pioneers but some students continued to write in the voice of the character they had created inside the drama. The student who wrote this journal had visualized a wolf as her special animal that was "covered in a gray and white fur with black eyes. I then named myself Enia." She used this name and wrote the following in her journal:

October 31, 1831

*Dear Journal,

Today we spied two pioneers berry picking. Later, after we left them a huge tornado sweeped the ground. Lightning (my horse) and I excapted by hiding in a cave. It lasted a long time. Lightning, my horse went to sleep right away while I searched for food. The cave was dark and shadows creeped all around us. After the tornado Lightning and I searched the empty forest. My long black hair blew in my face. So did Lightning's. We walked intill we came to where two pioneers laid on the dirt ground. Lightning carried them back to my wigwam. The small bed was made with fur and moose hide that my mother had made for me along time ago. Lighting laid them on the bed.

Enia

(*Original spelling and punctuation have been retained.)

The other three journal entries described how she helped the two people she rescued find their way home. Undoubtedly, this student kept on developing the voice that had arisen in the vision quest.

Another aspect about voice that needs to be addressed in regard to writing in role is the teacher's responsibility to provide appropriate material to develop well-informed voices. As mentioned earlier, Kelti had selected Speare's novel in order to lead her students on a vision quest. It is important to recognize that Speare's novel presents a European view of the interaction between Europeans and Native Americans. Her novel focuses on the faltering friendship between a white boy, Matt, and an Aboriginal boy, Attean, in the 1700s and therefore presents a clash between two cultures. The main character, Matt, by the end of the novel, however, has developed a respect for the Aboriginal culture as he learns more about it. It would have been valuable if Kelti

had included literature written in a Native writer's voice as well. If she had done this, the students would have had the opportunity to look at another point of view. When we are dealing with issues of diversity, it is essential to provide more than one perspective so that when we use the voices and words of others it is at the least an informed voice represented by the people we are hoping to portray. Dyson (1995) suggests that in Bakhtin's view "meaning only exists in the meeting of voices when we, as authors, both address and respond to the voices of others" (p. 325). She further suggests that our intentions do not come from our ability to turn inward, but rather from turning outward and listening to the voices around us. Our challenge is that we have to use the voices and words of others to say what we want to say. What Dyson is suggesting should not be overlooked by teachers who use the voices of authors to begin developing belief in a drama, especially in regard to the recreating another people. Britton (1970) believed that a dramatic situation that takes hold is one of the most powerful ways of forcing students out of their own skins and into somebody else's. When children step into different shoes to begin thinking as others they are responsible for what happens while working in role. A vigilant teacher needs to provide well selected introductory materials and activities that will help students as they build imaginary worlds and become involved in what they are creating. As Daiute (1998) states,

If a child's world is one that allows for elaboration within different cultural scripts, he or she will not only learn to differentiate a personal point of view within a culture but will also become increasingly skilled at enacting and discussing diverse points of view. (pp. 147-148)

Lensmire (2000) reminds us that the notion of appropriation is "the taking over, the working over, by individuals, of the language of others" (p. 77). The voices that the teacher provides in initiating activities in drama will be reworked and adapted for various purposes by the students. Language arts and drama educators therefore need to immerse learners in rich textual environments that represent multiple voices, not only the voices of the authors, but also the voices of the students in the classroom. The students in Kelti's drama appropriated words, character names, story lines, and biographies from the oral and written sources that were available to them. I believe that because only Euro centric voices were available, the children's portrayals of a Native people living in earlier times were limited.

Conclusion

These anecdotal observations serve as a reminder that researchers in language arts and drama education have a great deal to explore in regard to reticent writers and the power of writing in role. There is undoubtedly a productive relationship between the symbolic, visual, spatial, and aural nature of drama and writing (Neelands et al., 1994). I believe that this connection is contained in the notion of story. A story created in the lived through experience of a drama provides students with opportunities to draft and revise who and what they are within the drama. If students learn to continually work through drafting and revising processes in drama, I believe that these processes could eventually filter through into the writing process. The samples provided in this article attest to the fact that students were involved in ongoing narrative creation. These creations were to my way of thinking exercises in developing the imagination. It is important not to underplay the relevance of the imagination in both drama and writing. After all, imagination is only found in active minds. Cross (1999) suggests that we are afraid of the

imagination, and yet, how can we teach our students to become writers if we do not first teach them to allow their imaginations to spiral? In a process drama, imaginative involvement expands and therefore serves as a powerful stimulus for writing. This spiraling of the imagination happens because students are placed inside a story and provided with the opportunity to write in role enabling them to think differently about the content and form of their writing. Drama and writing are complementary meaning-making processes that provide rich environments for writers in our classrooms.

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Drama and Writing: Complementary Meaning-making Processes

The author explores the complementary nature of the writing process and process drama.

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Abstract:

The majority of writing approaches used in classrooms today focuses on the systematic completion of writing tasks. This article provides a different focus as it explores the inner compulsion to write while in role. It outlines the commonalities that exist between the process of writing and process drama. In a process drama writers are liberated, particularly the reticent or reluctant writer, because they are launched into another place at another time as another person.

Résumé:

La plupart des approches pédagogiques de l'écrit dans les salles de classe aujourd'hui ont comme but principal la production systématique de tâches écrites. Ce texte présente une vision différente en explorant le vouloir inné d'écrire en situations de jeux de rôles. Ici l'auteure tente d'identifier les points communs qui existent entre les processus de l'écrit et les processus dramatiques. Elle préconise qu'à l'intérieur du processus dramatique, celui qui écrit est libéré, ceci surtout chez l'élève qui hésite à l'écrit, car ce dernier se trouve à occuper un temps et un espace différent lorsqu'il devient une personne différente sur l'estrade.