

PUZZLING

by

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Lights on. A man is standing in the centre of the stage, holding a book and writing a complex equation, and at the same time he is checking every other minute his cell phone. The drawing board is split in two parts. On the other part there is a kind of dictation exercise, but the spelling is all wrong. At one point he turns around, looks at the crowd and seems disturbed.

I didn't expect anyone. Please go out (points towards the exit). No seriously. GO OUT. I have no time for you. If nuclear equations were not enough I now have a bunch of strangers looking over my shoulder. Anyway, my mother always said not to be rude to strangers, sooo please do sit, but do not interrupt me at any time.

Goes back to his work but hastily checks his cell phone.

Do you have any idea what a traumatic experience it is writing to a girl with a T9 system?

Smiles

Aw yes, I forgot. You don't.

I am a dyslexic.

That, according to the NINDS "significantly impairs my ability to read."

Yes I could live with that, if the rest of the sentence wasn't "despite having **normal** intelligence."

So according to doctors I am **not** normal. My teachers must have thought the same thing, for only one of them treated me like an equal to others and not as an annoying outsider.

Keeps writing the equation.

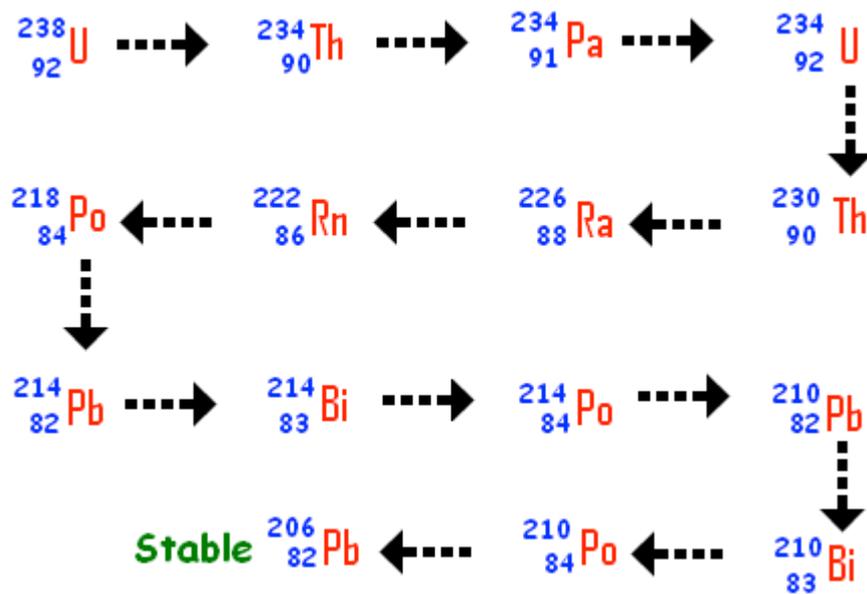
Which is ridiculous if you think about it, since I finished my entry exams in Maths 15 minutes after they were handed out to us.

Looks at the cell phone anxiously and shows it to the audience.

It is the simple things that make me feel uneasy. Take this phone for example.

The guy who invented it, the grandfather of its power source, was Thomas Edison. Do you know what a teacher did to him when he was young?

He sent him home with a note writing, “too stupid to learn.”



Keeps writing on the board. Then suddenly he stops and turns towards the crowd, sits on the chair in front of him and starts talking fast.

I am not a weirdo as they show them on cable shows. Sure my social skills are not considered “top-class.”

But that is because I am a good judge of character, the trouble starts with the expressions to be used in their... kind of...you know...

Anyways. About this girl I mentioned. *Checks his phone.* She is the reason I am checking this phone. I sent her the most important message of my life and she has not answered me yet.

I don't know what to think; it is stressful for me to be in situations like that I...

Making mistakes all the time, is that why she not want me?

He focuses on the other part of the board. He starts working on the anagrams and it seems that he writes MweRrtymuio among other strange things.

With numbers everything is easy. As bad as my writing is I have no problems with that. But the maps are a real torment for me. When I first came to the university I started following the map to get to the Applied Sciences Auditorium, but ended up in the Girls Rest Room in the Arts Building... Not the most appropriate place to meet a girl, and yet I met her there.

Seems to correct something and forgets his line of thought.

And to get things worse, when I become anxious, everything blurs around me.

Sounds furious

I even make mistakes with my numbers!

Goes on and corrects something on the board.

See that? I make such mistake in real life, I could destabilize a reactor and then...

All it takes is one mistake. And I must always be very careful.

Names are a problem, but if I much them with objects its fine. For example the Dean is called Jason something and wears a strange red glasses frame. But I remember that we have a psycho in our school that likes red and, ta daa, the name comes on its own.

Women are a bit easier due to necklaces, earrings, hairstyles, **bodies**.

Pauses for a second.

I never said that last one.

As I was saying all it takes is one little mistake.

Smiles and takes out the phone, checks something and then smiles.

No she didn't answer.

Mainly because I texted my sister instead.

And I sent the gibberish you might see there.

But she knows me all too well.

Stands up goes to the board, and writes by looking at his phone, “Will you marry me?”

Maybe I should omit the dumbass my sister added to that. It could alter the meaning, don't you think?

Pushes some buttons and puts the phone aside. Goes to the equation and completes it.

Numbers are easier, but they are not my language.
I doubt she will say yes. I am a walking problem. Or at least so an ex said when I asked her of the reason she was leaving me.

His voice becomes more aggressive.

But I know that I am not **normal**. I am so much better than that. I am something else. I am---how to spell it correctly---interesting! Yes I am interesting! And if some people are scared of it, then screw them. I am tired of being judged by every single...

The phone rings. He looks at it in amazement. He has doubts and is torn between the board and the phone. Finally he picks up the phone and listens carefully for a few seconds. Hangs it up. Turns to the audience.

She even spelled it out for me.

Turns around and writes with capital letters, “YAS!”

Issues of the mind: a self-reflection on a “dyslexic” play

Creating a play based on a dyslexic persona is a special procedure, since it focuses on an exceptional, meaning different from the majority, character. Apart from the aesthetic improvements that are consequential from continuous drafts on the writer’s behalf, challenges arise both from the attempt to overcome and avoid certain cultural stereotypes. This often leads to a passive-aggressive monologue that not only overlooks the difficulties people with special abilities face, but also pushes those people to the margins of society.

In this process, the contribution of scientists and experts to brain studies is of great importance. Oliver Sacks, Arthur Kleinman and G.T. Couser are exemplary in terms of their work, both medical and literary. Their significant contribution to the fields with regard to the narration of medical conditions (Sacks) and to the understanding of individual psychology and adaptation to treatment (Kleinman) as well as to the criticism over societal attitudes and standards in relation to abnormal forms of behavior (Couser), has had an impact on the composition of my dramatic monologue ideas, as will be demonstrated later in this self-reflective piece.

While building the only character in the play, I initially did a little research on how characters with special brain functions have been depicted on TV and the big screen as well as on the stage. From the syphilitic Miss Julie and the enraged Father in August Strindberg’s homonymous plays to the caustic protagonist of the TV series *Dr. House* and the film *Forrest Gump* (1994), people that societies consider as “cripples” either mentally or physically, live their lives either marginalized from and stigmatized by society, or at the center of society’s attention due to a series of abstract circumstances or their unique intelligence. The protagonist in my monologue is a Ph.D. candidate working in a lab. He actually deviates from all the stereotypes the audience has been used to, and yet at the same time he looks very familiar; hence the aggressive beginning of the play and the progressive narration of his life story that is rarely understood. It should also be mentioned that the acting out of this character poses numerous challenges to the actor. Erratic movements on stage and incoherent language delivery put the actor in danger of ridiculing or caricaturing the dilemmas the character faces in the course of his monologue.

Why focus on a dyslexic character? As part of the Narrative Medicine course, we were assigned to choose an illness, either from our personal experience or from something that drew our attention, and then write a creative piece about it. The truth is that the first thing that came to my mind when we heard about illnesses was not the physical pain and deficiencies, but the various illnesses and malfunctions of the brain, as well as the many special ways that some people’s brains are structured, which often leads to wrong assumptions about what is considered an “illness” or a different way of perceiving the world. Dyslexia is an illness according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), though many specialists tend to take a different stance. Dyslexia is considered to be a “learning disability,” and I don’t argue about that. However how can one explain the exceptional talents that people who “suffer” from dyslexia exhibit? I am sure that Leonardo da Vinci and Albert Einstein would tend to agree with this view that refuses to treat dyslexia as an illness, since their supposed brain malfunction did not prevent them from exhibiting their talents. As is stated in the play, when Alexander Graham Bell was young, he was sent home

with a note from the teacher saying that he was “too stupid to learn” simply because he was dyslexic.

The learning difficulties that dyslexic people have usually make them feel “dumb,” a word now considered a derogatory term, and this feeling is amplified by ignorant educators and vitriolic classmates. Society tends to react in a rather conservative manner to its members that deviate from the norm, and the case may be no different with dyslexics. The debates surrounding dyslexia still go on. It is not, of course, only the teachers’ fault, but also a matter of organization, as the lack of funding prevents schools from hiring experts that can diagnose and propose the treatment that would best suit the students’ needs. Judging from the above, I knew that collecting the information I needed for my monologue would not be easy.

Most of the information I have used with regard to how a dyslexic character talks and acts has come from my own experience, as a friend of mine in high school was dyslexic, and our everyday interaction was more than enough to give me an idea of how to depict a character with similar traits. Apart from the inconsistency of movements, which has been mentioned earlier, the behavioral patterns that I needed to recreate while writing my monologue has proved quite troubling as there are no visible patterns or traits that distinguish dyslexics from others. It has all come down to portraying a person who struggles but in the end does comprehend the world around him (in spite of the trouble he has with basic functions, i.e. reading) and tries to successfully blend into his community so as to be part of it.

The most important step in the creative process of character building is the story that the character needs to share with the audience. Dyslexic people, as it has been previously mentioned, face several everyday problems, and thus there is no need to exaggerate in order to create a credible background for the character. The role family and society often play does not need to be overemphasized; there is no need to present a vengeful protagonist. It is important to show that dyslexic people can have successful lives, and that in practice dyslexia does not limit anyone’s future plans. A Ph.D. candidate is an ideal choice for a character, as it shows that the person talking is both highly educated (having thus overcome all the boundaries set by those claiming that dyslexia is an illness) and ambitious enough to become someone important, working on projects that will have positive effects on millions.

Social disapproval is there throughout the monologue, becoming evident through the character’s doubts. A mistake in a mathematical equation he is trying to master at the start of the monologue does not constitute such a grave problem. Everyone makes mistakes, but in his case there is a difference. In his mind, though, there is the rejection that he has faced by many of his teachers and the notion that anything he does or will do will be severely affected by his “illness.” The crowd he addresses at the start of the monologue is not only a stage convention but also the embodiment of one of his greatest fears, the attention and the criticism of the community, a crowd ready to deprecate him and his work with every mistake he makes.

It is not accidental that the monologue is based on the cell phone SMS the character is waiting to receive from his girlfriend. The situation he finds himself in summarizes his whole life: rejection, mistakes in writing and a quest for approval by the people that surround him, agonizing moments till he realizes that dyslexia has prevented him

both from writing a comprehensible text message and sending it to the correct recipient. Instead of his girlfriend, he sends it to his sister, who might have indeed responded to him in an abrupt manner, but she loves him. He can really count on family to understand him. While staging this particular scene, I have tried to capture that exact feeling: a friend or a sister who reprimands you for being sloppy and not because you are dyslexic, and a girlfriend who may want to marry you for who you are, not caring about your learning difficulties or what people say about you.

Does all this sound familiar? Well it actually is. The depiction of a character that has some kind of special brain function is far from uncommon in literary and cultural production. Of the characters who have already been mentioned, only *Forrest Gump* had a “happy ending.” In Strindberg’s plays, Miss Julie commits suicide as the society and her lover reject her; the Father is driven mad and is to be institutionalized, while Dr. House cannot have a meaningful relationship with anyone but his best friend who is soon to die from cancer. What is common in all these characters is their temperament that stands out, as it is part of their “signature behavior.” Of course certain stereotypes are inserted in the monologue, such as the antisocial behavior that the character initially demonstrates.

Bringing in the specialists in my work has been another important part of the creative process, as it both adds credibility to the monologue and amplifies the meaning that is to be conveyed to the audience. Having mentioned earlier the debate over whether dyslexia is considered an “illness” or not, it is useful to consider how society views people who have difficulties as regards certain standard procedures, such as learning how to write and read. G. Thomas Couser believes that “disabled” persons are simply born different, whereas many of the members of the society around them reject the disabled people as abnormal, or even as victims (or products) of the sins of their parents. The latter especially derives from the attitude certain communities adopt towards people who are different, as their behavioral problems are often associated with their “inferiority complex”; in many cases what actually occurs is a self-fulfilling prophecy, since people with special abilities often react aggressively towards commonly held societal (often religious) beliefs about their condition (21-22). What is more, as Couser points out, there are numerous cases of people with disabilities both physical and mental, whose behavior is almost predetermined by the beliefs that govern the community they live in. For example, in cinema, scarred characters are in many cases presented as the villains, while in almost all cases of villainy in movies and books, the “bad guy” usually suffers from some kind of mental illness and rarely survives by the end of the book (17).

Arthur Kleinman’s work has been a great influence while writing the monologue as regards the caregivers’ responsibilities and feelings towards their loved ones who face various difficulties, both physical and mental. While many medical treatments have been proposed for dyslexia, it is still unclear whether these treatments are actually beneficial for dyslexic people, as they may interfere with other talents that dyslexic people are reported to have, such as the increase in the capacity to think and perceive multi-dimensionally and the further utilization of the brain’s ability to alter and create perceptions. Kleinman, while talking about the medication that is usually prescribed so as to overcome certain mental conditions, such as grief, makes a point about the use of medication in general. He notices a cultural shift, “well along its way, to remake experiences formerly regarded as morally bad, religiously sinful, disturbing,

or simply different, as medical issues of illness and disablement” (609). It is this notion that I have tried to incorporate in my monologue, relating to how society has been trained to think that anyone different from the majority should undergo some medical treatment to become “normal” again. I have tried to implicitly criticize the fact that just because some people have, for example, a different way of perceiving the world, it is necessary for them to be subjected to a medical treatment. I question the “overzealous” attempt by the world of medicine, or “business” as Kleinman calls it to “normalize” (609).

Oliver Sacks’s influence on my monologue would be accurately described as the most “literary” one. His narrative methods of exploring illnesses, especially as they are depicted in the *Awakenings* with the agonizing efforts of the doctor to rehabilitate former catatonic patients and make them “operative” again, have been extremely useful in describing how over the years the character has learned to adapt to everyday routines that to the dyslexic seem like a constant series of challenges. The process of adapting to a new environment for a dyslexic bears some similarities to the process followed by patients recovering from neurological damage. Nonetheless, it is equally important that the dyslexic learn to function according to some societal norms, as we can see from the problems that the main character in the monologue faces in reading a map correctly, with him finally ending up in the ladies’ rest room some blocks away from where he was heading.

I conclude with some thoughts I have had while writing this piece. The creation of the monologues has been a unique experience for me, despite my previous writing experience. In the past, when I wrote something, it had no specific purpose other than my personal satisfaction. In this case, writing a monologue that advocates a specific view about people with special abilities (or disabilities as most people call them) and at the same time attempts to be funny and provocative but not irritating and insulting, has made me more attentive to detail and careful language use. The use of humor as a literary device has been a conscious choice, and as it seems, it has proven to be the most efficient way to convey the messages intended. After all, those important issues that are addressed with a pinch of humor tend to stick easier to the memory of the audience, don’t they?

Works Cited

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