



THE SOUL OF THE AMERICAN ACTOR

HOME

ABOUT US

CURRENT ISSUE

ADVERTISE

RESOURCES

ANGELS & SUBSCRIBERS

artists
resources

books
&
plays

INTERVIEWS
with ARTISTS



BEN VEREEN



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Writing for Life

by Marjorie Kanter



Marjorie Kanter

I grew up shy. I went to a very competitive (though public) high school. I didn't do very well. But once in a while there were little successes that showed me some deeper aspects of myself. One came as a result of a story I wrote in the seventh grade about a little girl, obviously me, who wanted to be a ballerina, but she was very clumsy; she just couldn't keep up with the others, despite all the years she'd been taking classes.

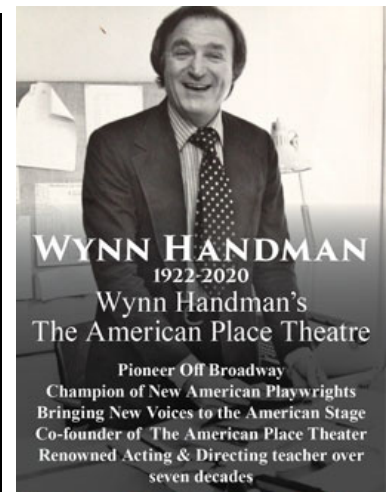
One day she woke up and found that she could dance beautifully, her dream had come true, but the story ends a page and a half later with her dreams dashed. She wakes up from the night's dream and finds that it was in fact just a night's dream, and nothing more. I received an A+ for the story... (as I remember it) this was my only good grade throughout junior and senior high school. With this one expression of self, I saw a bit of my possibilities and of my depths.

In another creative surge, a surprise one, this one during my first semester first year at Ohio University, I signed up for modern dance. I was failing all through the course, I mean the teacher was giving me an 'F' because I couldn't let go of 'pliés' and 'arabesques,' all the ballet movements I'd learned from ten years of ballet with an amazing teacher.

I was overall doing well, achieving, and this unrequired, elective course was going to mess up my grade point average. I was anxious and worried. For the final, we were assigned to prepare two choreographies and then to present them as short improvisations. I was so worried, upset and scared, but finally I got to work on them. The fear turned to being on my side. I performed 'Fear' and 'Rubber Cement,' and received an A+ on both.

I'd broken the fear, the blockage and let go. Again. I was given a glimpse of my depths, of what I was capable of... The professor gave me a 'C' as my final grade. I thought this cold, mechanical averaging of my various projects from the entire semester, totally unfair. I had achieved a real breakthrough; it was a real achievement. Unfortunately, I didn't take another semester of modern dance. I would have loved it. I had broken through. I love dance.

And then, going into the finals of second semester first year, I was flunking another course – zoology – the exam questions promising to be multiple choice.





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MAIA DANZIGER

EARL
"PEANUTT"
MONTGOMERY

WILLIE RUFF



DENNIS D'AMICO



GRACE CACHOCHA



Now in this case, I just wasn't interested in memorizing everything I needed to memorize. But for the final, in order to bring my grade up, I studied and crammed and got a good solid 'A'. This professor also gave me a 'C' as my final grade.

But in this case, the grade seemed fair, I wasn't going to remember enough of what I had stuffed into my short-term memory to warrant me more than that. I had done it, managed it, for the grade, but not for the learning. I learned a lot from each situation and seeing them together.

And so, my life has gone... surges and valleys and exploring and finding my ways.

I studied to become a speech and language therapist. I worked in this field both in direct service and in teacher training. Writing was important here, for the reports I would write about the students I was serving, learning how to provide information that would be helpful and not hurtful, how to describe rather than judge, etc.

And then... I moved to Spain.

I took some time off, and suddenly, living in this culture and language that I barely knew, creative writing found me. Here I was in this small southern Spanish town, Tarifa, where I lived for eight years. At the outset, I barely spoke the language, didn't get the nuances of the culture, and had very little opportunity to speak with others in English.

Living in this context, writing as a writer happened to me in a natural way. I got a notebook, sometimes toilet paper, the back of tickets and who knows what else and jotted things down which I then saved. I was writing to the air and to myself, for myself. (This was way before the computer and the mobile phone.)

And what's more at this time in Tarifa, the electricity in the whole town would go off at some point on a daily basis for an extended period of time and communicating with people at a distance was difficult, tedious, costly and not immediate.

Much of the writing was about things that upset me or frustrated me or were just curious. At the time, this writing served the purpose of parking the incidents, a letting my mind go free of them more than anything else. But I didn't throw the words away.

Eight years later, I moved to Madrid. I carried the words with me. My Spanish was much improved. My understanding of the culture too. I began rereading the journals; now I had a computer and as things in the notes jumped out at me and attracted my attention, I copied them onto a digital document. On this revisiting of my texts, I even discovered that as time had gone by during those eight years in Tarifa, much of my journal writing had turned from English to Spanish in form.

Now in Madrid, every day, I would print those notes out, and at 4 pm, take them to my favorite café, Café del Prado (now gone) on Calle del Prado (with its marble tables, jazz recordings and just a few clients at that time of day, just the right lull and din for my process), read them and add text to them by hand. They'd grow and shrink and find their shape and content. Many of these texts ended up in my first book, I Displace the Air as I Walk.

At the outset, I'd had no plan to publish, it just fell into place, with a lot of work, of course, but it was not intended for publishing, it was personal. I had started out writing for myself, moved to sharing bits and pieces with friends and slowly saw I had more than that, I had a book (and word projects) and then another and now another. This last one, finally, a bilingual book of short pieces in English with their adaptations to Spanish that I coordinated... but with the help of many Spaniards who collaborated with me.

Writing is capturing experience. Writing is a process. Writing is sharing experience. Writing is fun. Writing can be stressful. Writing can be rewarding. Writing can be a delight, an enrichment, a pleasure, writing is communicating with self and 'other.'

Writing can be in the form of a tweet, a scribble, a note, a list, a resumé, the text of a cartoon, a poem, a story, a novel, an essay, a script, a research report, a journalistic report, a tool in self-development... it is a valuable instrument that requires work, but can be so rewarding.

Here is just one very short text from my first book, I Displace the Air as I Walk:

Mint tea

I served my
neighbor
salt
in her

Essays

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by Marjorie Kanter

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by Vic Perillo

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A Great Reminder for Us All

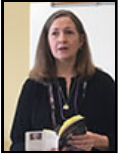
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"The life of the
arts in the life of

mint tea.

We're still
friends.

M. Kanter, *I Displace the Air as I Walk*, 2004

The real experience is just like the text above, except that a lot is left out.

What was the situation?
Who were the people?
Why were they together?
Where were they?
Why was the salt served to the 'one' by the 'other' when sugar would have been the appropriate ingredient?

Stop here for a moment!

Answer the questions above for yourself and **write your own story.**

Pause!

Reflect!

Write!

(if you would like to share what you've written, Marjorie would love to read it.
Email your Mint Tea text with 'Mint Tea 2020' placed in the subject heading to:

Margiekanter@gmail.com

When I give writing workshops, I often use my texts, and leave a lot of the story out. I ask the students, alone or in pairs or small groups, to develop a fuller story. Then we share what everyone has written, talking, reading and/or performing our versions. This gives us an opportunity to see the multiplicity of ways we can respond to a prompt or a situation and through sharing we also get new ideas and further develop our thinking and writing.

So, what was my 'Mint Tea' life story you ask?

I was still living in this small Andalusian town, Tarifa, but I'd been away for a while. Upon returning, my neighbor (we lived in close quarters) knocked on my door just before bedtime and asked if we could talk. I invited her in and offered her a cup of tea. We are of different realities: me, a city-girl and she, a country-girl, she – Spanish, me – American, and many other contrasts which I consider private and therefore choose not to disclose here.

She was very orderly in her kitchen; I, a bit of a disaster in mine. I kept things like sugar and salt in jelly jars. I gave her a container of sugar and a spoon, and I watched as she spooned in seven teaspoons full, for her Moroccan mint tea. She took a sip. And another. She put the mug down and we talked. She seemed nervous and tense. She took another sip or two, and put the mug down again and said, "I don't want anymore." I said, "Yeah, we're getting older, it's bedtime and we don't want to have to get up in the middle of the night to pee."

Shortly we said good night. The next morning, I made myself a cup of coffee for myself for breakfast. Normally, I don't put sugar in my tea, and therefore I had not used it the night before, but I do take sugar in my coffee. I put those white crystals in my coffee, took a sip and spit it out. It was salt and not sugar. So, I had a new perspective of my neighbor's discomfort the night before. She was nervous about what she wanted to talk about. But the tension was more than that.

On this particular morning, I had gotten up earlier than she had. There was no sound in the patio we shared, and I was careful not to wake her up.

When I finally heard her open up her heavy blinds and windows, I opened my door and called to her. I said, naming her, "Why didn't you tell me I'd given you salt instead of sugar for your tea." She didn't answer me.

Go for writing. Develop your skills. Get into flow. Enjoy it. Work through the stresses. Use it for communication. Use it for learning. Use it to your advantage.

To me writing is not what I often hear writers say, 'a lonely business,' to me it is full with self-dialogue, interchanges with others, building of relationships, life experience, learning, everything all together in one universe. •2020 Written exclusively for "The Soul of the American Actor" Newspaper.

MARJORIE KANTER lives, writes, installs words in public spaces, leads interventions and participant performances and gives creativity writing workshops. Born in the U.S., she has lived in Spain for the past thirty some years. Her short literary pieces and poems are sparked from real life experience, that first land in her journals and often highlight issues of in/communication and minimal sketches of life.

"Let Thousand Flowers Blossom"

by Dr. Jayalath Manorathna

A Double Life: My Exciting Years in Theatre and Advertising

by Alyque Padamsee with Arun Prabhu



"The Skin of Pour Teeth"
by Thornton Wilder –
painting by Maribee

"Living consciously involves being genuine; it involves listening and responding to others honestly and openly; it involves being in the moment."

– Sidney Poitier

"The artist must be a leader. He must be true to what is most eager, vital and boldest within himself. Only in this way can the audience gain something from him. By being awake himself, the artist must awaken the audience. This ultimately is what the audience also desires – to be awakened."

– Harold Clurman

"Life is short, Break the Rules. Forgive quickly, Kiss SLOWLY. Love truly. Laugh uncontrollably And never regret ANYTHING That makes you smile."

– Mark Twain

"One must surrender entirely to the power of one's artistic nature. It will do all the necessary things. Do not impose any solution upon yourself in advance."

– Yevgeny Vakhtangov

a nation, is very close to the center of a nation's purpose – and is a test of the quality of a nation's civilization.”
- President John F. Kennedy

She is author of [I Displace the Air as I Walk, Small Talk](#), "The Skirt" in [The Barcelona Review](#), "The Outsider" and "House Menu" in [Courting the Bull](#), "The Waitress" in [The Radiance of the Short Story](#), "The Swimming Pool" in [Unbraiding the Short Story](#), "Siesta Time in Andalucia" in [Influence and Confluence: East and West](#) and [Field Notes/Notas de Campo](#) (her first bilingual Spanish/English collection). On internet, she has several projects that include creative texts and research including: "Impoliteness" developed for the London Word Festival and currently a new developing project on Facebook, "Silence: A Project." www.marjoriekanter.com

“All I insist on, and nothing else, is that you should show the whole world that you are not afraid. Be silent, if you choose; but when it is necessary, speak—and speak in such a way that people will remember it.”

– Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

"It is a law of life that man cannot live for himself alone. Extreme individualism is insanity. The world's problems are also our personal problems. Health is achieved through maintaining our personal truth in a balanced relation of love to the rest of the world. No expression is more emblematic of this relation than the creative act which we call art. No art by its very constitution typifies the social nature of that creative act more than the theatre. The theatre, to be fully understood and appreciated, must be seen as a manifestation of this process of interchange between society and the individual. It must be judged as a continuous development of groups of individuals within society, a development which becomes richer, acquires greater force and value as it grows with the society in which it originates. Only in this way can the theatre nourish us. - Harold Clurman

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| HOME | ABOUT | ADVERTISE | RESOURCES | BLOG | SUBSCRIBE | CONTACT |
| ESSAYS | INTERVIEWS | ARTICLES | BOOKS & PLAYS | LETTERS TO THE EDITOR | ARCHIVES |

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