

SHOES ON THE HIGHWAY

Using Visual and Audio Cues to Inspire Student Playwrights

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Introduction

I took a break from writing this book and went to have my hair done. Gloria is my hairdresser. After sitting all day in front of a computer, she is the dispenser of a special kind of nirvana. Gloria asked what I was doing this summer and I said that I was writing a book about playwriting. She continued to slather my hair with something that smelled like heaven, asking polite questions about the book. But, when I told her the title of the book, she became animated and energized. “I saw a sandal on the road yesterday. How did that shoe get there? Was some kid sticking his foot out the window? God forbid that an accident took place there and a shoe was left behind. When I see a kid’s shoe, I get the chills” . . . and on and on.

It happens to me all the time. When I mention shoes on the highway, the reaction is instantaneous recognition and enthusiastic conjecturing. “How did that shoe get there? And why is there only one shoe?” I’ve talked to some people who have actually seen how a shoe ended up on the highway. But there are more unexplained shoes out there. And they make people think and wonder.

The reason I first started taking pictures of these shoes was purely artistic. The image of one shoe alone on the side of the road was a haunting image that made a great picture. It was also a metaphor to me. It said something about our society. Cars rush past these shoes, their drivers absorbed in morning coffee, cell phone conversations, and mental lists of things to do. They don’t have time to stop and wonder about a shoe. I thought of all the people alone in the world who are like that shoe, living on the very edge of society. So I began to photograph the shoes.

And there were *lots* of them. I was astonished to realize that there were also all *kinds* of shoes on the road. I found a dress shoe, a work boot, a Winnie the Pooh sneaker, a pair of sandals, clogs, even a Doc Martin. And I found them at the oddest times. Easter morning I saw a navy blue ladies dress shoe in the road outside a church. Was someone in a hurry to get to sunrise services? Did they suddenly

look down at their feet in the middle of a “Hallelujah” and realize that they were wearing only one shoe?

My daughter, who is also a photographer, joined me on these photographic trips. I would drive and she would hop out and shoot. People began to tell us where to find a shoe and we would make a list of places to go to catch the best light of the day and the lightest amount of traffic.

But there was one shoe that made me stop and think. Our family was in a rush to get to a school concert. I saw a tennis shoe on the entrance ramp to the highway we took to get to the school and I asked my husband to stop the car so I could take a picture of it. I jumped out with my camera, which was loaded with film to take pictures of the kids at the concert, and snapped a picture of the tennis shoe. I turned around to get back into the car and saw another shoe; a red dress shoe, covered with grit, lying by a drainage grate. I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it before. I started snapping pictures and one of them became the cover to this book.

I jumped back into the car and the whole family talked about that red shoe. How did it get there? There was no consensus of opinion, but there were a lot of good stories told.

There were good stories behind the shoes. And good stories make good plays. So I began to write my own play about shoes on the highway. And then I shared the pictures with my playwriting students. I asked them what they thought about the shoes. They came up with the most imaginative stories about how the shoes got there, about the characters that put the shoes on the road, and on and on. The pictures made them think and wonder. The pictures really helped them write monologues and scenes and plays.

The shoes were the beginning. This book is the result of six years of teaching playwriting to youngsters by using visual and audio cues. These chapters have been used not only in my classroom, but in classrooms across the United States. They've been used by language arts teachers who want to teach a unit on playwriting and by theatre teachers who are looking for ideas to energize their playwriting students.

This book is not a “how to” book on writing plays. There are plenty of books out there already. This book is the answer to the questions writing teachers hear at least a hundred times a year. Questions like, “What am I supposed to write about?” or “I can't

think of anything to write. Where do I start?” This book is also for teachers who want to try something different, to risk, to bring characters and stories to life onstage, and to write a play. I believe that there is no other form of writing that is so exciting to teach.

I hope that you will enjoy this book and use the ideas in your classroom. I hope that if something doesn't work you will adapt it to fit your students and their particular needs. I hope that this book becomes one of those books with random pieces of paper stuck in the chapters you like the most. I hope that it refuses to stay shut on your desk because the corners are folded over from so much use. And I hope that you will write to me *MaureenBJohnson@aol.com* and let me know what works and what you've changed to fit your course. And most of all, let me know if you see any shoes out there.