

## Stories and Symphonies. Breathing Life into *Breathing Room*



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I named her Marilyn.*

by Mary Lou Newmark

I was trained as a classical musician, so my approach to theater comes from a different perspective than most playwrights. I view my theater work as an extension of my music composition.

I usually start with music, with sounds, and with the rhythm of words. I also write poems that can stand alone, but sometimes become integrated into the music.

“Breathing Room” began with music compositions and poems. Over time, I recognized common themes appearing in my pieces: a sped-up society barraged with stimuli, losing touch with our bodies, and with Nature around us. I realized that there was a work here that was bigger than a collection of poems and more than a series of music compositions.

My pieces were initially based on personal experience. The “Bed, Bath, and Beyond Experience” is a combination of storytelling and musical soundscapes. It is based on a disorienting experience I had with a store that relocated across Olympic Blvd. and had grown in size to become a bit frightening, where the “shopping carts became stalkers that just followed you home whether you wanted them to or not.” After writing this piece, I saw a character emerging who was not me--a visual artist who was creative but somewhat trapped inside her standards and a little overwhelmed with life. I named her Marilyn.

A second character then began to appear, with a contrasting persona: a science teacher with a mysterious past. The Professor is Marilyn's neighbor, analytical, but mischievous, playful, and grounded in an odd way. Both these characters sprouted from more abstract figures in my previous dance/theater work, “Breath of Trees.” The two of them could help each other to see their differences and tease each other into new ways of thinking.

My two characters would explore how people in contemporary society engage with each other. And how we engage with Nature personally and collectively. The audience would see the characters' blind spots before they do.

I began to write monologues, dialogues, and interlogues (poems spoken back and forth by the two characters). I composed more music and envisioned possible dance sequences. The work grew more complex, as I began to play with juxtaposing different elements to show connections between them. My characters began to find equivalencies (things that people don't think of having commonalities): words and music, quantum physics and spirituality, light and sound.



After months of scribbling, I ran a draft by my friend Dan Berkowitz, drawing on his years of script writing and directing experience. Dan and I agreed that the draft was a collection of modules. My previous theater pieces were organic, circular in shape. “Breathing Room” was more complex; it needed a structure.

I thought for a while and drew on my classical music background. Why not use the structure of a symphony? The work would have four acts/movements plus a coda. Each would begin with a musical tempo and a quotation to set the tone. Following the pattern of a classical symphony, the structure of “Breathing Room” became clear. Act I (“Allegro”) sets a lively musical pace, introducing the piece's themes. We learn about the “peanut butter explosion” and Marilyn's latest artistic project. Act II (“Andante”) is a slow movement filled with personal stories and a meditation on hummingbirds. In Act III (“Minuet”) our characters dance around meatball-eating bears. The fourth act, “Presto,” brings frenzied action, as Marilyn and the Professor wrestle with “modern technologic vertigo.” The act builds to a breakthrough climax where everyone “pops the QWF.” (No, I won't explain that further. You'll have to come see the show.)

The piece ends with a Coda, a poem our characters share that invites the audience to open its hearts.

There is a third character in “Breathing Room,” someone I almost forgot to mention: a musician. But don't expect classical string sounds. As the musician, I play the electric violin, with soundscapes, and perform my original compositions live as part of every show. I interact with the characters in many ways, in duet, ensemble, underscoring, commenting, and providing a larger context.

“Breathing Room” is a chamber symphony in four acts for two actors and a musician, directed by Dan Berkowitz. Yes, there is a lot going on in our 70 minute show. I agree with This Stage that creativity is “born from a cross-pollination of disciplines.” I hope you find this play creative in unexpected ways, a thought-provoking experience, and especially an enjoyable one.

**NOW PLAYING: BREATHING ROOM** at Greenway Court Theatre, through October 25.



A humorous and lyrical tapestry of words, music, movement and quantum physics. A science teacher with a mysterious past (Charles Reese) and a visual artist overwhelmed by life (Eileen T'Kaye) explore our modern culture of “technological vertigo” in a series of playful and intriguing scenes infused with music — played live at every performance by playwright/composer Newmark on her trademark neon-green electric violin.