

## At the Edge: Madness and Medicine

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



### WEEK 5 Art speaks to and from silence

SR: Steve Reid

FD: Finuala Dowling

SB: Sean Baumann

SR: Can I get to some of the specifics of the techniques that you use? Because rather than just talk about art, if imagination is a common denominator. But Finuala, you used brilliant metaphor and humour to unpack this world and represent it, and Sean, you used image and music and a whole story and characters to bring this alive. So there are specific techniques, in a way, that allow us, in a way, to enter a parallel way of seeing the same reality.

SB: Certainly, I'm just trying to think of, in a way, the parallels between what Finuala's done and what I've tried to do. I think by using the voice and then linking it, and sometimes almost with an image that might not necessarily literally correspond, and combining that and linking that again with an image or a piece of music that, by creating, almost dislocating our senses, that we are then prompted to think anew, to, in a way, we cannot respond in a familiar, predictable way to this strange combination of sounds and images, that we are then, possibly, we are prompted or need to rethink or to broaden and deepen our response.

FD: I think, for me, the techniques that I use are, sort of, surprise and humour and the unexpected. And I mean, metaphor is, by its very nature – it's nothing peculiar to my poetry – it is the unexpected joining of two things that haven't seemed alike before, like how is a woman entering dementia like a castle in ruin, and then, you expand on that. I think what it is, the way it works is, with regards to an audience, with somebody else who's not had this experience, it's a kind of tripping up. That you're

saying, you've been toddling along your safe little pathway of thinking, but come and join me...

Because I think a lot of what the artist does it, I feel, is a question of: I feel this, do you feel this? And we want to get this audience's attention, we so much want them to join in with us that we have to stop them, almost in their tracks, and invite them, to say, just look at this little vignette, just see how funny that is, just notice how surprising that is, and we catch them off-guard.

SR: So to continue that little metaphor of jumping tracks, it strikes me that we set up this parallel – I use that word – way of seeing, but at the end of the day, we have to re-engage with reality, you have to go back to your mother, had to go back to your mother, you go back into the psychiatry hospital, to face the harsh reality. I mean, that doesn't go away, necessarily, but we have come from a different place. Is that something, how it works?

SB: Certainly, but I just want to, I suppose, pick up on what Finuala had said earlier about listening, the importance of listening which is in some sort of way, acknowledging what the experience of what somebody has been going through, attending to it. It sounds incredibly simplistic in a way, but I think it's critically important because there's a tension, I suppose, between acknowledging and attending and seeking to diminish or eliminate. It's complicated because in one way I'm trying to help, I'm trying to make things better, but part of that making things, making something better is to, more fundamentally, I think, is to acknowledge.

FD: Yes, to establish the veracity of something and, in some cases, give it a dignity by giving it a huge amount of attention, something that was a moment in your office or a moment in a frail-care ward.

SR: So that brings me to the last theme I'd like to explore, and that is what we're doing here on the MOOC, and what you've done with your performances in different fora, is to bring this thing to public attention, this somewhat difficult and hidden area of serious mental illness. And the role that the arts has in advocating, I suppose – to give one particular meaning – for mental health to be less stigmatised and more

something that we all need to face in one way or another, if not for ourselves then for our loved ones.

SB: To me, it's absolutely a fundamental motivating factor for this project was because I do believe that exclusion rising out of the notion of otherness is a huge part of the burden of suffering of people with serious mental health, so it really was by giving a voice to, by trying to be authentic, showing respect, granting of dignity to people in these extreme states, would be some way of generating understanding, and through understanding, hopefully an empathetic response, which I do believe is fundamental to a way of helping.

FD: I think art always has to seat itself in the area where we are not allowed to speak, the voices we have not allowed a voice to. So art always goes to the silence and speaks from the silence, and that I found, and I'm sure Sean found, afterwards, a lot of people responded to the poem saying, I'm going through this situation with my mother or with my husband or wife, and so I think, for me, a large part of what poetry does is to console and say, you know, you're not alone.

SR: Yes, absolutely. Well, thank you, both of you, and I'd like you to feedback your comments, once you've seen this video, to all of us, to give us your insight, your particular experiences and reflections on the role of arts in dealing with the issues of mental health.



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