

Psychodrama not Personal drama: The Hours

Psychodrama and Personal drama are not the same. Martina Nagel explains how to write a Psychodrama by looking at *The Hours*.

If you are a writer and know nothing about genre, you'll probably end up writing a Psychodrama or, at least, you will aspire to writing a Psychodrama and end up with a Personal drama. Most European films are written in the latter genre and Robert McKee's dismissal of this genre is only too apparent in his book *Story*.

McKee describes the personal story as 'a typical and persistent kind of failed feature screenplay. The personal story is under-structured, slice-of-life portraiture that mistakes verisimilitude for truth. This writer believes that the more precise his observation of day-to-day facts, the more accurate his reportage of what actually happens, the more truth he tells. But fact, no matter how minutely observed, is truth with a small "t". Big "T" Truth is located behind, beyond, inside, below the surface of things, holding reality together or tearing it apart, and cannot be directly observed. Because this writer sees only what is visible and factual, he is blind to the truth of life.'

Philip Parker, however, provides a more sophisticated and defined description of this very complex genre in an analysis of the Personal drama in issue 9 of *ScriptWriter*. He states that 'the Personal drama is one of the most difficult genres to work in and the least understood in terms of its use as a framework for narrative development'. Because the Personal drama is highly character-orientated and works on an apparently smaller visual scale, over the years it has retreated to the television screen where

it now dominates the series form.

I agree with Parker that on the big screen the Personal drama works best in combination with another genre and in this article I will look at one of its close relatives, the Psychodrama. In the western world we are naturally familiar with the narrative form of the Psychodrama since its basic structure relies heavily on psychoanalysis.

Ordinary People, *Dead Men Walking* and *The Hours* are all Psychodramas. What they have in common is a traumatic incident that occurred in the past and now dominates every moment of the present. Actors relish this

Movement in time is a trademark of the Psychodrama and such devices as streams of consciousness justify the retelling of the traumatic event in each individual's life.

genre because it provides them with the opportunity to portray complex characters. There are no noticeable special effects, no action sequences that limit the time of the actor's performance. Quite the opposite, the camera is glued to the actor, registering every hint, every beat, every nervous twitch because that is where the story lives, in the actor's face, in the expression of his or her inner turmoil, making them relive an old, inner wound until they finally come to terms with it.

Consequently, it is the Best Actor's award that has brought recognition to the Psychodrama with Timothy Hutton, Susan Sarandon and Nicole Kidman receiving major awards for their performances in the above-listed films.

However, screenwriters are not as fortunate with this genre. Robert Redford's directorial debut *Ordinary People* has proven to be the exception by receiving the Academy Award for Best Screenplay in 1980. The reason is simple: writer and actor carry this genre; there is no cinematic trickery to distract from or cover up any shortcomings on their part. Also, very often writers do not satisfactorily achieve a successful narrative structure of the Psychodrama. The audience might see brilliant moments from the actor but without the narrative framework, the film cannot be really effective, unlike a masterpiece like *Ordinary People*.

The Hours received many positive reviews for its acting achievements, though most film critics restricted themselves to a simple summary of the three story lines instead of shedding some light on the different artistic levels of dramatisation. Although I struggle somewhat with the principal concept of the film, I shall attempt to apply the story conventions of the Psychodrama to *The Hours* in order to unlock the interior structure of the film.

The Hours follows three women in different eras over the course of a single day as they begin to write, begin to read, and subliminally re-enact the fictitious character of Mrs Dalloway. Both novels, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs*