

DREAMING TOGETHER



Explore Your Dreams
by Acting Them Out

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Prologue

THEATER OF DREAMS



An Overview



Our Own Shakespearean Stage

The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was.

—Bottom, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Some of us—I would say most of us—live a fairly humdrum existence. We may have our ups and downs—occasional adventures, momentary triumphs, simmering resentments—but most of our lives are lived in a habitual manner under ordinary circumstances. Often we are so busy, and so caught up in our routines, that we don't notice the emotional impact of our everyday life.

To put it another way: we may get angry with our boss, but we don't stick a knife in his back; we may fantasize about a woman on an elevator, but we don't start unbuttoning her blouse.

In dreams, we do.

In dreams, we live a life as rich and full as the *dramatis personae* of the Shakespearean stage. Our dreams are inhabited by killers and seducers, betrayers and enchanters, flying creatures and hideous monsters. And low-lives, too, like the “rude mechanicals” in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Plumbers and car mechanics populate our dreams; taxi drivers and shoe-shine boys; our fat noisy neighbor and the scary old lady who lives next door. They are all there. Everybody. From the lowest of the low to the highest of the high. Not to mention our parents, our children, and our lovers in their many benign and malignant disguises.

Certain things that happen on the Shakespearean stage only happen to us in our dreams. Where else do we try to murder our brother, romance a queen, meet witches on the road or, like Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, become the love toy of a Fairy Queen while sporting the head of an ass?

Dreams give us access to a range of experience that includes our mundane life but goes far beyond it. We experience in sleep the passions of a Cyrano, of a Hedda Gabler, of a Richard III. We become a thief, a movie star, a randy lover. We visit places as exotic as Prospero's Island, the forests of Elyria, and the castle at Elsinore.

At the same time, our dreams focus on more down-to-earth things: we have dreams of sitting on the toilet, dreams of cooking bacon in the kitchen, of fixing the engine of a car: everything from the sublime to the ridiculous. In dreams we drink, burp, fart, and bellow to rival John Falstaff. Dreams sometimes seem like they are making jokes; there are even dream puns.

Dreams expand our horizons and animate the ordinary. They make us feel the breadth of our desires and the passion we bring to everyday life. When we tell dreams and share these experiences with other people, we recognize a common humanity that goes far beyond the confines of our mundane existence.

In my experience, the immediate value of dreams doesn't come from explaining them, analyzing them, or following their overt or covert suggestions. It lies in re-entering them, living inside them, tasting and chewing them, until they become incorporated into the fabric of our waking hours. When we re-enact them we play "as if" they are really happening to us. Thus they "really happen" to us again and again.

On a practical level, this book provides a method for re-experiencing dream life as our own Shakespearean stage. Beyond this, though, is a larger purpose: to reanimate the ordinary through the imagery of dreams, and to bring the extraordinary back into our lives.

Take the following dream, for example, and imagine it as your own. What would it be like to live inside this dream over and over again by telling the story and acting it out? Playing all the parts, and entering all the images, you would become an ancient sailor, a mighty storm, and a young woman wildly steering a runaway boat whose Pilot has gone "night blind." It might even make you consider how, in your real life, you have been feeling out of control lately—as if your "pilot" is flying blind.

Christine's Night-Blind Boatman Dream

I am on a shore. I see a boat there. It is a very old wooden sailing boat. Inside sits a man with long dark hair. He seems ancient and holy like Jesus of Nazareth.

I like him and I want to get into the boat. As soon as I step on board, it leaves the shore and sails into the sea.

The sky is a golden orange. The water is still, reflecting the light.

Then the night comes in. And the darker it gets, the more the tempo of the boat picks up and accelerates. I see big buildings and big ships looming in the darkness along the waterstreet. Faster and faster we go, and I get scared because we are almost running into those grey shapes.

In a panic, I look to the man steering the boat next to me, hoping he will do something to slow us down. But he doesn't. He is totally indifferent to whether we live or die.

I try to tell him how dangerous this is— "Watch out! Look out!"—but he just shrugs and says: "Doesn't matter. I'm night blind."

Night blind! Omigod, I think. He can't see where we're going!

Suddenly, we drive very close to a huge ship and almost crash and I know I have to do something. Quickly, I get behind the boatman and put my hands on his shoulders. Very gently, I move him by his shoulders left and right as if to steer him. Like he is the steering wheel.

And it works. He puts up no resistance and is completely one with the boat. By steering him I can keep us on course. Through the night, I navigate the boat, swerving past the dark shapes without crashing into anything. It is very strenuous. I have to concentrate with all my might to peer into the thick darkness.

But finally the journey ends; the boat slows down and comes to the shore. I scold the boatman: "You know, it's very dangerous to drive through the darkness when you're night blind!"

Then I wake up.

What are dreams?

Dreams come to us in the shank of the night, in the light of dawn, in the lap of a nap. They come unbidden, on their own volition. Or they don't come at all, depending on their mood. We can sometimes coax them out, catch them on the fly, write them in a dream book, or tell them to our partner over coffee in the morning. But we can't make them up, or even remember them at will. They are, by nature, elusive creatures with their own volition, appearing or disappearing by their own whim.

Whether they have their own motivation or purpose—carrying insights, messages, or prophecies from our unconscious or from the gods—is a question I like to avoid, or at least dance around. My working premise is that just about *all* the assumptions people make about dreams are true—at least some of the time. Sometimes dreams seem to be random bits of daily flotsam and jetsam; sometimes they make deep emotional connections; sometimes they touch on our most intimate yearnings; and sometimes, for some people, they suggest paths for our life's journey.

My own experience with dreams is mainly poetic. When the imagery of my dreams resonates with my daily life, I find myself deeply moved, disturbed, or enlightened. Whatever your experience, this guide to Dream Enactment does not require you to have any particular take on dreams: you don't have to be a Jungian, or a Freudian, or anything like that. You just have to have a connection to your dreams that feels personal.

The only assumption basic to this work is that dreams are independent artifacts. Their imagery, character, narrative, and geography are not under our conscious control, and often don't obey either natural laws or societal norms. For all we know, dreams may have no "purpose" at all. Maybe they just *are*.

In any case, it's safe to approach them with this assumption, even if at times it seems that a particular dream is "talking" directly to us. It is this quality—that dreams are both part of us and apart from us—that makes them so valuable to anyone interested in their inner life, and to artists in particular.

How might we describe dreams, then, as independent artifacts, if we were, say, dream archeologists trying to evaluate what we find in the field? We would say first of all that dreams are fleeting. If we don't write them down, talk

them out, or otherwise transfer them from short-term memory to long-term memory, we usually forget them.

Secondly, dreams almost always take place in a place. "I was sitting at my kitchen table . . ." "I was flying over my old childhood home . . ." "I was walking through a forest of white birch trees with patches of snow on the ground . . ."

On rare occasions, someone will dream that they are floating in outer space or surrounded by blackness; but this space or blackness usually has as palpable a quality as any other environment. Mostly, though, dreams have a specific location and, to the extent the dreamer can remember that setting, he can place himself back into the dream space and navigate within it.

Thirdly, dreams are experienced in the language and culture of the dreamer. When a Japanese woman dreams she is cooking a meal with her daughter, she is inevitably in a Japanese kitchen speaking Japanese. If the dreamer is fluent in more than one language or has a multicultural background, her dreams may sometimes come from one culture or the other, or from a mixture of the two, but rarely from a language or culture totally foreign to her experience. There are exceptions, of course, when dreams create exotic landscapes with tantalizing foreign words and customs; but even these dream fantasies are rooted in the fantasy notions of the dreamer's native soil.

If you listen to enough dreams of a particular person, it becomes clear that her dreamscapes carry their own individual signature, as specific and identifiable as her waking personality. For instance, my friend Juno, a quiet and somewhat somber poet, often has Gothic dreams with intricate and imposing architecture. My friend Jordan, on the other hand, tends to have transformational traveling dreams populated with fantastic creatures.

In other words, people seem to dream (or at least remember dreams) from their own peculiar vantage points. Our style of remembering dreams differs from person to person. Furthermore, our style of remembering dreams often differs from dream to dream. Sometimes we remember only a fragmentary image; sometimes we remember the dream as a disjointed story of oddly disconnected scenes; and sometimes as a coherent story that seems to lead towards a culminating event.

Finally, it should be said that dreams are rarely dreamy. They are usually very particular in detail: you are in your grandfather's apartment next to the old dumbwaiter, or swimming underwater with a shark that has peculiar patchy skin. There may be unusual juxtapositions in dreams—one minute you are in your grandfather's apartment, the next you are swimming with a shark—but they are rarely surreal, not at all like a Salvador Dali painting with its dripping time pieces. Some details may be remembered more in focus than others, but the details are specific, rarely generic. So it's worth your time to explore the details of the dream. The polka dots on an umbrella may be exactly the same as those on the polka-dotted umbrella you had when your parents divorced; the look in the eye of the hawk may be the same as the look in the eye of the teacher you revered in college.

The juicy stuff is in the details.¹

Why tell dreams?

Dreams are personal, intimate, idiosyncratic. They bring up feelings unbidden. They invoke people and places that are dearest to us. And then they invoke people and places that seem totally inconsequential to us, and infuse them with emotional clout. Our most bitter or sweet moments are recalled and transformed in dreams, while other seemingly random moments are made equally frightening or enchanting. In short, our imaginations filter memory and experience through an emotionally charged image-maker that generates a personal response to ordinary and extraordinary things alike.

One obvious reason for telling dreams, then, is to get to know one another better, to create a window into our inner landscape. Telling dreams is an easy, safe way to share our intimate, emotional lives.

Of course, we could always decide to share intimate, emotional moments simply by telling one another our life stories. But how many of us would want to do that, particularly with strangers? Even with people we know fairly well,

1. This is why it's often rewarding to pay particularly close attention to any specific numbers, times, or dates in dreams. Usually dreams are vague on these matters, so when you have a dream that you must meet someone at 10:20 you might want to ask what happened, or what is supposed to happen, at 10:20 in real life, or if anything significant occurred on 10/20, that is, October 20, or if the series 10 . . . 20 . . . 30 . . . means anything to you.

we tend to keep our biographies fairly close to the chest. And even when we *do* decide to tell our life stories, they tend to be fairly well rehearsed, presented in a way that puts our best foot forward or shows our public face.

Dreams, though, by their very nature cannot be consciously prepared. Like a good poem or visual collage, they are revealing even without explicit biographical detail. The imagery speaks for itself. Luckily, we are not responsible for their content. The things we do in dreams are connected to our passions but not to our ethics, morality, and expected rules of conduct.

This makes them fun, intriguing, mysterious, and revealing, as in this dream I had a few years ago:

The Wild Men Dream

In this dream there are two wild men. They both have long, unruly, frizzy hair and rough, coarse, lumberjack-style shirts. One of them is tall and lanky, the other short and squat. The short squat one has a comb and stands behind the tall lanky one. He puts the comb through the frizzy dark hair of his wild companion, and starts blowing on it, making music. The music is the most beautiful, uplifting tapestry of sound. Not a buzzing, humming noise but something almost orchestral. When I woke up I couldn't remember the exact composition of the music but I could sense its soaring intricate architecture.

When I started to tell this dream to a dream group, much to my surprise, I broke into tears. I had thought the dream was simply about two strange creatures and their strange way of making music together. As I worked on it, though, I realized that this music-making reminded me of how I used to write songs with my good friend, Steve Cummings, who died prematurely a few years back. Steve and I looked nothing like these wild men, god knows; sometimes, though, our music came from a pretty wild place. Or, at least, *we* thought so.

Somehow, this dream gave me permission to vent my feelings about losing Steve. If someone would have asked me about Steve, I certainly would have said that I missed him. But, in a casual setting, I would never have shared with