

Watching Tennis, Mining Cliché for Poetry

Melissa Tandiwe Myambo

“...Tennis is about: passion.”

“Tennis is about control,” Eric disagreed.

“Tennis is about *everything*,” Willy declared with feeling.

Eric laughed. “Well, I wouldn’t go quite that far.

But...the tennis game is the window of the soul.”

Excerpt from the novel, *Double Fault*, by Lionel Shriver

In this passage above, “window of the soul” is a rather clichéd expression but clichés are a conundrum. On one hand, their prescriptive, pre-packaged depictions of our world are like the worst type of stereotypes which circumscribe the world’s delightful potential to unexpectedly supersede and elude all expectation and assumption. According to my Webster’s dictionary, Lionel Trilling defines clichés as “those desperate perceptions of our life which...have become so obvious...that they seem to close for us the possibility of thought and imagination.” But if I were to tell you that watching the most sublime tennis match is akin to poetry in motion, that too would be a clichéd description.

The problem is that it is almost impossible to speak of tennis or any other sport without resorting to cliché. Even

that scrupulous chooser of the most precise word, David Foster Wallace, who was endowed with X-ray vision allowing him to see beyond the surface of so much, was often reduced to apparently trite observations of the game. In an otherwise meandering, vaguely misogynistic and self-indulgent novel by Martin Amis called *The Information*, the most meaningful scene derives its intensity from a tennis match between “frenemies” in which competition on the court mirrors their off-court rivalry.

Clichéd? Yes. But effective.

Hence, herein lies a defense of clichés. Despite our deadened ears which hear only their hackneyed syllables, their square box rendering of our complex world, some clichés do contain a kernel of idiom and the timeless wisdom of proverb. And to watch a tennis game – like the most inspired match of all time, the fabled 2008 Wimbledon final between the reigning champion Roger Federer who is half Swiss and half South African and the Spanish Clay Court King, Rafael Nadal, trying to stake his claim on grass for the first time - is truly like seeing a poem in motion, and an epic at that.

Like poetry, tennis requires the mechanical use of tools (ground strokes instead of words) that are repeated a million times but in the right combination at the right tempo and with the right rhythm, each can suddenly transform into a condensed, heightened, intensified medium which elevates the ordinary (words, ground strokes)

to the inspirational.

All of this is just a long prelude (excuse?) to justify the trite, hackneyed list of clichés that I have assembled here. As all my students, friends and family know I am always watching a tennis match on my desktop, laptop or TV and this is what I have learnt from watching all that tennis. (Unfortunately I can barely play but I pay attention to what commentators and players say about the game and I do watch very carefully.) Some of what I have learnt may come off as cliché; some may strike you as more poetically profound. The point is sometimes it is hard to tell the difference so here goes...

“Stay in the moment! Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Tennis coaches and tennis commentators always harp on about this. They stress the importance of remaining in the present tense because thinking about the point you just lost or your desire to break your opponent’s serve in the game after this one can cloud your ability to play the point you are playing at this very moment. A good player, they say, can simultaneously block out the past and the future so s/he doesn’t play the scoreline. S/he just plays the point at hand.

Someone once told me that true happiness is about fully embodying the present moment, not thinking beyond it. As a teacher/writer/researcher, I find myself envying tennis players their full embrace of the present tense because my job requires me to constantly ruminate on the past, reflect on the present and try to envision future

possibilities. Sometimes I long for a profession in which you just are - being as opposed to thinking about the state of being, your mind in harmonious synchrony with the body. Perhaps that is why I still love teaching Zumba, step and boxing because those are the rare moments when I am unconsciously thinking with my muscles which are literally performing my thought process/choreography/technique. I am not trying to figure out anything besides what is happening right then and there. The perfect state of mindful being.

Paradoxically, however, you have to stay in the moment but simultaneously, go all out and...

“Play every point as if it were match point”:

Serena Williams once wrote: “I have never seen such tenacity, such ambition, such fight and such honor go into every shot as when I watch Rafael Nadal. I want to be like him. The attitude he exudes the moment he walks out on the court is the attitude of a true champion.”

Players like Rafael Nadal are often lauded for their capacity to approach every point as if it were not just a question of victory or defeat but a life and death struggle. What I admire about Nadal is that he plays like that whether he is winning or losing and he keeps on playing as if he is winning even if he’s losing. Yet, even when he’s winning, he plays as if he is losing: running for every point, displaying such dogged tenacity and unflagging mental grit

that I can't help but root for him. He always seems like the underdog even when he is not because although one of his nicknames is El Matador, the bull killer, for me he always seems more like the beleaguered bull. You can see him working, suffering, struggling. It is as if he is constantly under attack as he belabors each and every point as if this were it – match point.

Paradoxically, however, a true champion has to be ready to lift her game to yet a higher level when she is really staring down match point because...

“Playing well makes you good, but playing the BIG points well makes you a champion”:

Like so many events in life, it is not the ability to execute that counts, it is the ability to execute under pressure. Solving equations whilst sitting at home at your desk is one thing, solving equations in a difficult exam when you have five minutes left to go is quite another. Articulating your feelings about your relationship with your partner to the mirror in your bathroom is one thing, articulating your feelings about the relationship to your partner when you're on the verge of keeping it together or breaking up is quite another.

Amongst the world's top-ranked players, there is little to physically differentiate their games. Yes, maybe one has a more devastating drop shot or blistering cross-court backhand but really, they are all pretty amazing players.

So what makes a champion? It's the ability to still the quivering butterflies fluttering in your intestines, the capability to calm those nerves, the wherewithal to muster the chutzpah and the verve to face down match point with a perfectly executed serve and volley or to lay down a clutch ace at the crucial moment when you are in a tie-break and you are about to lose one more point, lose the game, lose the set, lose the match, lose the whole damn championship.

In other words, you have to be able to perform when it really, really, really counts. And that takes incredible concentration, mental strength and emotional stamina because it is just you out there, all by yourself, trying to save the day.

Paradoxically, however, no champion can succeed on her own and this is possibly the biggest cliché of them all. Victory is always a...

“Team effort. It's all about the team”:

Although tennis, like boxing, requires the athlete to go out there and perform without the comfort of a team on court, tennis players rely on their off-court team to get them through their matches. Of course they have their coaches, physios and hitting partners etc. who all play an essential role but from the other side of the TV screen, my side, tennis players mostly seem to have very close-knit families who support them. Parents, siblings, cousins, uncles etc.

feature at every big game along with the same Significant Other year in and year out. The Big Four – Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer, Andy Murray, Rafael Nadal – who have dominated the men’s game for the last ten-plus years flout the stereotype of the philandering alpha-male athlete. They have all had the same partner since they were teenagers, going on a decade or more now, but they have also had something else because paradoxically, to make a good tennis player, it takes a whole team but it also takes...

**“Worthy Rivals! Your rivals push you to
the next level”:**

Whilst men’s tennis is currently enjoying a Golden Era in which the field is deep and broad, meaning there are scores of excellent players who can consistently challenge each other to keep improving, the women’s game right now is not so lucky. Serena Williams is a great player but she would be so much better if she had even one current player who could truly threaten her. It is not Serena’s fault that she does not have a rival. (Sometimes asinine commentators try to pretend that Maria Sharapova is her rival. Sharapova has not beaten her since 2004 and should she ever face a Serena weakened by a broken leg, pneumonia and food poisoning, it is doubtful she would win). Chris Evert benefitted from her rivalry with Martina Navratilova and vice versa. Williams now is only “playing for history,” as they say, against former greats like Steffi Graf whose spectacular record of Grand Slam titles she is

trying to surpass. Depressingly, the lack of real competition at the top of today's women's game leads to more cliché and less poetry but combine this with the paradoxical fact that...

**“Tennis pays women the same as men
but it is still sexist”:**

Why do women only play best of three instead of best of five sets at the Majors? This makes women's tennis much less entertaining than men's. There can be no epic women's match that goes 16-14 in the fifth like the heartbreaking Roddick-Federer 2009 Wimbledon final when women don't even play five sets. This is pure sexism! As a tennis fan, I have learnt that classic matches are more often than not those played by men rising to the challenge of going five. Sadly, and as clichéd as this sounds, for a global sport, tennis is still paradoxically...

“A white man's game”:

The presence of a few players of darker hue like the African American Williams sisters, Congolese-French Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, Chinese Li Na (before she retired) and Japanese star, Kei Nishikori etc. does not change the fact that tennis is still largely an

upper-class, elite, white-dominated game.

Players like the late great Arthur Ashe began to challenge that mold in the 1960s although he was adamant that he should not be confined by the reactionary racial politics that plague both the game of tennis and the game of life: "My potential is more than can be expressed within the bounds of my race or ethnic identity," he said. Taken too soon, Ashe always wanted to break boundaries and be remembered for not only what he did in and for the game of tennis but also for his stellar achievements and activism off-court.

Ashe's quotable quotes are often a study in paradox but you can decide if they are more cliché or more poetic proverb. I leave you here with some of my favorites...

**"You've got to get to the stage in life
where going for it is more important
than winning or losing."**

**"You are never really playing an opponent. You are
playing yourself, your own highest standards,
and when you reach your limits,
that is real joy."**

"Start where you are. Use what you have.

Do what you can."

**"From what we get, we can make a living; what we give,
however, makes a life."**

~ Arthur Ashe

***#*\$%*#**