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Dramatherapy and the Healing  
Aspects of Acting -  
Steps Towards a Theatrical Model

Franceen Brodtkin

A Research Paper  
In  
The Department  
of  
Creative Arts Therapies

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2001

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Dramatherapy and the Healing Aspects of Acting - Steps Towards a Theatrical Model**

Franceen Brodtkin

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2001

This paper illustrates the healing effects - psychological and emotional - of organic acting techniques, and attempts to adapt these techniques to dramatherapy, in order to create the beginnings of a new theatrical model. This work is heuristically influenced, as it involves the researcher writing and performing a dramatic piece, and charting the process, in order to further test the belief in the therapeutic benefits of truthful acting. The theatrical model that emerges emphasizes the importance of improvisational exercises - on their own, or as a lead into work on character and text. Also discussed is the selection of appropriate role for the client, as well as how to apply the improvisational techniques to text work. Finally, there is an illustration of a hypothetical dramatherapy session. From past experience, and present research, the conclusion is drawn that these processes are indeed healing, and are viable therapeutic tools to be used in dramatherapy.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Purpose of the Investigation

My research topic is “Dramatherapy and the Healing Aspects of Acting - Steps Towards a Theatrical Model.” The primary purpose of my study is to investigate existing theatrical models in dramatherapy, and to take steps towards creating a new one.

I would define the theatrical model in dramatherapy as a way of working therapeutically where the processes and techniques utilized or explored are derived from the theatre, rather than from therapeutic schools such as psychotherapy, psychodrama, or playtherapy, for example. I strongly agree with dramatherapist Mitchell (1992) who feels that,

too much emphasis in both theory and practice has been given to established schools of psychotherapy, and the drama has been the appendage when there is still so much to be discovered in the dramatic process itself ... I believe it is important for dramatherapists to identify a conceptual system that employs the inherent healing factors of theatre or drama as the primary therapeutic process in dramatherapy (p.51).

I am not attempting to present a complete model but am exploring new ways of working in the field. I have found that in existing theatrically based models, there seems to be much unexplored territory in terms of using or adapting exceptional and recognized acting techniques which potentially are enormously therapeutic. My prior work as an acting teacher has shown me that these techniques can enable clients to access not only their creativity, but also deeper sides and aspects of themselves. Many students I have



worked with have found their lives transformed by this work.

### **Description of the Model**

The first part of the model is a description of various improvisational acting techniques which are Stanislavsky based. The Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky (1937) was considered the father of modern acting. I discuss how these techniques can be adapted or used therapeutically.

The second part of the model examines the therapeutic value of working with text, and how beneficial it can be for clients to play certain roles at particular points in their lives, and in their therapy. This is, of course, a very individual process, i.e., a role suitable for one client might be totally inappropriate for another.

My research approach is heuristically influenced as I test my theories on myself. Douglass and Moustakes (1985) describe heuristics as a “passionate and discerning personal involvement in problem solving, an effort to know the essence of some aspect of life through the internal pathways of the self” (p.39). They also state that it requires “a subjective process of reflecting, exploring and elucidating the nature of the phenomena under investigation” (p.40).

I have investigated my theories by writing and performing a short play, and charting my creative process through the writing of the piece, into rehearsal and a workshop performance. I have attempted to explore how acting in this role at this time in my life has been healing for me. Within my creative process I also use the techniques I have discussed earlier. My main focus has been on the process, rather than on the

performance. Therapeutically, I believe that though both hold tremendous healing power, it is within the rehearsal process that the major benefits occur. Indeed without this prior, in-depth work, healing or catharsis in performance would not be possible.

### **Research Questions**

My primary research question, then, is: What makes the art of acting psychologically and emotionally healing, and can specific and proven acting techniques be applied or adapted to dramatherapy?

My subsidiary question would be: Using these techniques, how has creating this role and performance piece been healing for me, and what knowledge and understanding have I gleaned that can be used in future work with clients?

### **Definition of Terms**

I would like to first clarify what I mean by 'acting as healing', or more specifically, what kind of acting I am referring to. Amongst performers and teachers, it is often acknowledged that there are two kinds of acting. American teacher Uta Hagen (1973) calls them the representational and the presentational, or more simply external versus internal acting. In the former, the actor works technically and intellectually from the outside in, illustrating the character, rather than being emotionally involved himself. In the latter, the actor works organically from the inside out, using his own emotions and life experience, in an attempt to understand and reveal human behaviour through the character. Stanislavsky's work, which focuses on truthful acting, has spawned many

organic acting methods over the past century, on which I will later elaborate. A great teacher once asked me if I was reading a book, or just pretending to read a book, really crying, or pretending to cry? In internal or organic acting, there is no pretence, but a constant aim for genuineness. It is this second kind of acting that I believe to be therapeutic.

Teacher Sanford Meisner (1986) felt acting was the art of self revelation. I espouse this kind of acting in my model as I believe that one must delve very deeply and honestly into oneself in order to produce worthwhile creative work, and similarly, in order to have a valuable and healing therapeutic journey. Focusing on truthful acting work within dramatherapy, to my mind, is one way to facilitate a productive and enriching therapeutic experience.

### **Method of Research**

Douglass and Moustakas (1985) state that “the one who searches heuristically may draw upon the perceptual powers afforded by maturation, intuition, and direct experience” (p.46). The techniques I discuss have been culled from several organic acting methods I have worked with, as a performer and teacher, over the last twenty years. I have examined those that I feel are therapeutically viable for a variety of populations, though, as in any model, they might not be appropriate for everyone. One would need to be at a certain intellectual and emotional level to do text work, for example.

In terms of the role I have chosen, I have created a short, one person play based on the life and work of the writer Katharine Butler Hathaway. She is someone who I

strongly relate to, as an artist, and as a human being, though her life experiences were vastly different from mine. Through Katharine's story, I have been able to explore aspects of myself, as well as relationships in my life that in certain ways parallel those in Katharine's. It has been an extremely powerful and enriching experience, enabling me to clarify how I would like to pursue this work with clients.

I have worked on this project from October 2000, through April 2001. For the last four months I worked with a writer/teacher who has great interest in, and affiliations with, dramatherapy, as well as with a workshop group comprising myself, a director and a dramaturge.

## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter One consists of my literature review which includes current literature on theatrical models in dramatherapy. It also covers an overview of the acting methods and philosophies of many renowned theatre directors and teachers. I have examined the work of several psychologists and therapists who believe in a creative and organic way of working. Lastly, I have looked at actors themselves, both professional and non-professional, who acknowledge the healing aspects of acting in their lives.

In Chapter Two I discuss my past experience as an actor and acting teacher, how my methods and beliefs have evolved, and how they have influenced my present work as a dramatherapist, leading me to explore the connection between acting and therapy.

In Chapter Three I explain the technical tools I am using. I discuss their origins, how to work with them, and how they might be used therapeutically, standing on their

own, or as a lead-in to text work.

Chapter Four charts my creative process through the creation of a performance piece, and includes relevant journal excerpts, kept throughout the process. I also discuss the importance of appropriate role in dramatherapy, the therapeutic benefits of working on character and text, as well as how to use the improvisational techniques with text work. Finally, I discuss the results of my experience, and how I can apply my findings to a theatrical model.

In the Conclusion, I summarize the results of my study, and outline the beginning steps I would take in creating a therapeutic theatrical model.

## CHAPTER 1

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In my literature review, I have attempted to investigate which currently working dramatherapists use a theatrically based model, and focus on acting, and/or performance as healing modalities. I also explore the philosophies and acting methods of several of the great acting teachers, and discuss their awareness and interest in psychological processes, and the link between acting and psychology, as both study human behaviour.

I examine the work of psychologists and therapists who work organically and creatively in their practices. And, lastly, we hear from the artists themselves, actors and performers who work from the inside out, and who acknowledge the healing aspects of the acting process, giving examples of how their work has often profoundly affected their lives.

One dramatherapist whose work brilliantly incorporates both theatre techniques and performance is Renée Emunah. Emunah (1994) speaking of her work with clients, stresses that whether the theatre work is improvisationally based, or text and performance oriented, its goal is first and foremost process rather than result. This thinking coincides with my own in terms of acting being healing, and is really the bottom line for me in all acting work. Going for results, or an audience response, keeps one on the surface, and prohibits one from fully exploring the emotional life of a character, or consequently, of oneself. She also states, as I believe, that “Acting with integrity, or being audience to others who are acting with integrity, is a path towards deep knowing and healing” (p. 11).

Emunah (1994) works with clients in five phases, and uses structured

improvisation in the second phase of her work. Though I do not think she spends the required time in this phase to do the kind of work I envision, which would necessitate some good acting training, she does emphasize the importance of developing acting skills with clients, believing that “without a certain level of dramatic proficiency, the scenes are not ‘real enough’ for the work to be truly therapeutic” (p. 41).

Emunah (1994) has also done work directing clients in what she calls self-revelatory performance pieces. Much of the work has been with ex-psychiatric clients who have developed plays based on their life experiences. It is a form of therapeutic theatre she firmly believes in. It is also an area of performance that interests me greatly, but though Emunah has achieved excellent results, and I would certainly do self-revelatory work if the client was eager to do so, I am much more drawn to character work. I believe that having the ‘mask’ of a character allows one to more safely explore oneself, and one’s issues. Emunah herself quotes Oscar Wilde, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person, give him a mask and he will tell the truth” (in Ellman, 1969, p. 389). I agree with Wilde, and also feel that character work would appeal to a wider range of populations, and would not be nearly as intimidating as a public performance revealing one’s mental illness, or addiction, for example. Emunah defines self-revelatory as “revealing an issue which is current, as opposed to autobiographical work, where the issue has been resolved” (p. 224). This concerns me, as I tend to agree with teacher Uta Hagen (1973), who believes that even with character work, one should wait at least seven years before ‘using’ or substituting a deeply personal experience from one’s life into that of the character one is portraying. Otherwise, it can be emotionally too difficult to

handle.

In conversation with Emunah at the NADT conference, November 2000, she said that acting skills were not important for self-revelatory performances, that “working from the heart is”, a curious contradiction from her earlier words on the necessity or at least advantages of acting training. In response to her words in conversation, I said that acting skills are especially important in self-rev. performances, because they give one the tools to safely tap into and genuinely use one’s emotions ‘from the heart’. Furthermore, a higher quality of acting helps the performer avoid self-indulgent work, which can alienate an audience, and consequently, the experience will not be very therapeutic for the client.

Sue Jennings (1999), one of the acknowledged founders of dramatherapy, also corroborates my belief in the healing power of acting and theatre. She has said that when she gets too far away from theatre, she functions less well, losing her perception, and a sense of well being. Even tried and tested therapy has not helped. “I have often needed to get back to the theatre to recover. I suppose I have experienced my own personal healing through theatre” (p. 10), and “I tend to call what I do these days much more healing theatre, than dramatherapy” (p. 11).

The work of dramatherapist Brenda Meldrum (1993) also interests me. She believes “that dramatherapy is based primarily in the theatre, and that the role of the dramatherapist in a theatrical model combines the attributes of the empathic theatre director with those of the humanistic psychotherapist” (p. 10). In her own theatrical model she often works with text, and is greatly influenced by Peter Brook, one of her goals being to help clients develop towards becoming what Brook calls a real person.



She quotes Brook who says, “A real person is someone who is open to all parts of himself. a person who has developed himself to the point where he can open himself completely. with his body, with his intelligence, with his feelings, so that none of the channels are blocked” (p. 10). Meldrum (1993) also believes that,

characterization is to drama and dramatherapy what role reversal is to psychodrama.... However to mimic, to impersonate is to leave oneself out of the process, but to enact is to involve oneself and one’s own emotions in the characterization of the role (p. 12).

This coincides with my own belief, when working on character, in the necessity of organic acting, i.e., being truly emotionally involved as the character, rather than just pretending or demonstrating.

In speaking of the importance of role and characterization in therapy, Meldrum (1993) discusses Jones’ definition of dramatic projection, which he sees as “the process by which clients project aspects of themselves or their experience into theatrical or dramatic material, or into enactment, and thereby externalize inner conflicts” (p. 10). Meldrum feels that through dramatic projection, clients re-integrate material, which can lead to inner changes. She believes that “the theatrical model can help us integrate our emotions, impulses, and desires into our social roles because it allows us to explore our creativity in an honest and spontaneous response to other people, using our bodies, intelligence and imagination” (p. 13). Other than briefly mentioning her stronger influences, like Mitchell, Boal, and Jennings, Meldrum does not elaborate on specific methods she uses in her theatrical model, or in her work with text, dwelling more on her

theories than on practicalities, but her philosophy and goals seem to be very sound.

I am drawn the most to the theatrical models of dramatherapist Mitchell (1996) whose approach comes from theories of theatre, humanistic psychology, and from Eastern philosophy - adding a spiritual bent to his work, which I am also inclined towards. He discusses Rebillot (1994) who talks of how in ancient Greece the theatre was considered a central aspect of healing, that patients were sent to the theatre as part of their treatment. Other theatre influences include Grotowski, and Brook, the latter, whose theatre work inspired a model of dramatherapy. This model incorporates a voice and movement exercise derived from Brook's work, as well as a creative and therapeutic philosophy. Mitchell (1990) feels "the dramatherapy group becomes a 'rehearsal for living', and the dramatherapist a director, a facilitator who 'prepares' them for the greater stage" (p. 16).

Mitchell (1998) calls his more recent work *The Theatre of Self Expression*, which is a ritual theatre form, having seven different approaches. He believes "that when a client in a therapeutic context is engaged in the actor's craft, s/he participates in just as intensive 'Work-on-the-Self' as a client 'working' directly with his/her own personal issues in psychotherapy" (p. 4). In all seven approaches, Mitchell stresses that "theatre skills are necessary, - training in body, voice, improvisation, scene study, performance" (p. 6). In Approach 5, *Transformations in Character*, text is used, and a character developed that has meaning for the client. "The character chosen will have a particular need. This need will often be a need of the animateur (client), in his/her own life, which is unexpressed and requires attention" (p. 8).

Mitchell (1998) again stresses the necessity of utilizing the actor's craft "to go

beyond what Brook (1968) calls deadly theatre, and I call deadly role play" (p. 8). He mentions Emotional Memory, which I discuss later, and the necessity of the client to "stop playacting, and begin to inhabit what Rebillot (1993) calls 'the soul of character' from the inside, rather than from externalizing the character through playacting" (p. 8). But he does not explain how the client is to do this.

Though I am inspired by Mitchell's philosophy, ways of working, and broad canvas, like Meldrum, he does not elaborate on how to develop the acting skills that are necessary for this work. The acting training he espouses, which I agree is crucial to the results that he aims for, cannot be taught quickly or simply. Organic acting is a deep and involved process, and I believe it to be not only a process that is therapeutic in itself, but also a pre-requisite to **any** theatre model.

In envisioning a theatrical model, I have also examined the work of the great theatre directors and acting teachers of the last fifty years. As Meldrum (1993) believes, dramatherapists can emulate and learn from their creative work. For example, the director Peter Brook (1993) talks about starting his work with "a formless hunch, a shadowy but powerful intuition. Inside he must be listening to the secret movements of the hidden process. This is why a constantly changing process is not a process of confusion, but one of growth" (p. 144). Brook emphasizes the crucial aspect of process in creative work, as Emunah (1994) does in therapeutic work. Brook's way of perception also interests me in terms of client assessment. I find that in my own work, when meeting new clients, if I can allow myself to absorb their energy and emotional state viscerally, as well as intellectually and analytically, I can see who they are more deeply, and am more

open to their rhythm, needs and processes.

Brook's son Simon trained at the Drama Centre, London, the main school he endorses and esteems. Some of the methods I wish to incorporate in my model come from studies with directors from that institution. Yat Malmgren, one of its teachers, was a famous Swedish character dancer, and an associate of Rudolph Laban. As heir to some of Laban's work, Malmgren has combined it with Jungian psychology, creating a theatrical model he calls Movement Psychology. Aspects of this work could, I feel, be applied to dramatherapy. This work is not yet available to the public, but Christopher Fettes (in Mekler, 1989) says, "No aspect of the training at the Drama Centre has had a more deeply and richly educative function than the work of Yat, the most remarkable teacher of his generation in this country" (p. 78).

Another esteemed acting teacher whose work is organically based, and lends itself well to dramatherapy, is the American actress Uta Hagen. In her classic books Respect for Acting (1973), and Challenge for the Actor (1992), she works with many Stanislavsky based exercises that help an actor to work truthfully. She is consummately aware of our psychological makeup, and in both books, written twenty years apart, she consults with psychologists to consolidate her findings, and to further understand human behaviour in order to better ignite the creative process in a healthy and genuine way. Her tenet of waiting several years before using creatively a traumatic experience from one's life, for me parallels the necessity of allowing clients to proceed at their own pace, of not pushing them to confront or reveal what they are not yet ready to examine.

Vilga (1997) interviews the teacher Stella Adler, who first brought Stanislavsky's

work to America, having gone to Russia to interview him and learn about his methods. She believes that acting teaches us how to be present, and how to live moment to moment. “The actor knows everything that he is surrounded with. He is aware. He watches and he sees more than anybody. He is trained to see” (p. 8).

Professor and acting teacher Kristin Linklater believes “there is no separation between working on oneself, and training for the theatre. As students of acting we are required to spend our days examining ourselves and examining the human race” (Appleton, 1995, p. 79). She believes that the acting process helps one become emotionally resilient in one’s life. “No emotion is negative. Each one has its place. To be able to swim in those oceans is very important to be full human beings” (p. 79).

Sanford Meisner is acknowledged to be one of the great acting teachers of the past century. Meisner (1986) believed that acting was a road towards self-knowledge. He also felt that “the truth of ourselves is the root of our acting” (p. 45). His detailed and very specific improvisational work, as well as his work with text, lends itself powerfully to dramatherapy in two ways: a) by helping the client develop acting skills which can enhance the therapeutic experience, and b) through the exercises being in themselves therapeutic. The exercises aid one’s ability to listen, to communicate truthfully, to develop one’s imagination, to live moment to moment, to work through traumatic experiences, to develop self-confidence.

Like Hagen, Meisner (1986) was fascinated by the connection between psychotherapy and acting. In his book, On Acting, he quotes a passage of Freud’s on the ability of the artist to create a fantasy life so strong that his repressions can be balanced

and dispelled by it. Meisner says, “I can’t tell you how much this discussion of fantasy helped me clarify my thoughts about the problem of Preparation” (p. 134). (Preparation is the emotional preparation necessary before a scene begins.)

Psychologist Brian Bates (1987) believes that actors are intuitive, creative psychologists, and that their way of being has much to teach us about “finding our inner identity, integrating our life experiences, having insight into others, and about living in the present with risk and commitment” (p. 7). Though I feel he has a tendency to deify actors, I agree that the actor’s way is a life path where he is constantly exploring his own psychology, and that of others. Hence learning to act can teach one how to live better.

Certainly acting enables us to learn how to be emotionally freer, as opposed to being emotionally stuck or bound. Therapist Christine Caldwell (1996), like acting teacher Linklater (1995), believes that by feeling our emotions fully, they are allowed their transient lifespan. She states,

Emotions are designed as short term change agents, to move us from one state to another, in an adaptation to a spontaneous change in the environment. By allowing this to happen, we stay in responsive and responsible relationship to ourselves and the world (p. 87).

Psychologist Anne Wilson Schaeff (1992) believes that those in the helping professions must continually work on their own self-healing, even “making a paradigm shift themselves, in order to work in any creative, healing way with others” (p. 307). I believe that acting classes for therapists and especially creative arts therapists would be wonderfully healing and stress releasing.

Actors themselves reiterate again and again the healing effects of acting in their personal lives. In Actors on Acting, Kalter (1980) interviews gifted actress Geraldine Page, who talks about how playing an emotional scene, even the most wrenching, can be wonderful. “There’s something about releasing all those tensions in acting that’s very cathartic. It feels really good. It’s a funny contradiction, but it’s true” (p. 26).

Carole Zucker (1999) interviews Eileen Atkins, who says, “I often think actors really shouldn’t need psychoanalysts, or any kind of analysts; I think we’re terribly lucky because we get to go through things legitimately. We get to release things” (p. 9).

Zucker (1999) also interviews Lee Grant who talks of her role in In the Heat of the Night, how she had lost her real husband, and how the film dealt with a husband who was murdered. “So the attraction to that emotional catharsis was very strong for me, and I really needed to get that out of my system” (p. 127). Grant also talks about her work on the film Tell Me a Riddle where three of the actors were facing various losses. “We all needed that film very, very much as a way of exploring through art the pain of what we were going through, the separation that we were facing” (p. 129).

Grant, like Lindsay Crouse, was trained by Meisner (1986). Zucker (1999) also interviews Crouse, who says, “Sandy taught me that when you perform a play, you are going into unknown territory, and you don’t know what you’re going to meet” (p. 15). This advice to stay open, not to prejudge, or plan, or crystallise, for me is akin to how therapy should be, and resonates with the process-oriented way of thinking of Brook and Emunah.

Crouse also talks of a scene in the film, The Verdict, where her character must

make a confession. Crouse has substituted something powerful in her own life that she is 'confessing'. She believes that great acting happens when the scene parallels something you must do in your life, that the scene is your life in that moment. She says she worked for months to figure out what confession from her own life would be absolutely impossible for her to make in front of anybody. "And I confessed that in the scene. And the event was cathartic for me. I made the confession and I've never had to deal with it again. I did it!" (Zucker, 1999, p.21). And, in Bate's (1987) interview with Marlon Brando. Brando says, "Acting has done as much as anything to make me realize my violence and get rid of it. And when I finished 'The Wild Ones', I think it was gone forever" (p. 4).

There seems to be a great similarity in thinking between professional actors and students of acting, in terms of therapeutic benefits. Elaine Appleton (1995), a writer studying with acting teacher Marc Clopton, talks of her experience in his class for non-professionals. "In the practice of acting we find ways to understand, even heal our lives offstage" (p. 78). In the same class, corporate lawyer Michael Hill finds acting enables him to overcome shyness: "I think everyone has something that is dug deep inside their soul and that can't get out, and everyone wants to see that released, so they can be more whole" (p. 78). And again, in the class, mother Diane Boucher, molested as a child, believes it was acting, not psychotherapy, that got her past the trauma. "It brought me out of my shell. Now it's okay to have all of my feelings. It pushed ten years of therapy down to two. My therapist was telling me to talk about my feelings. Onstage I lived my feelings!" (p. 78).



I would like to close this chapter with the thoughts of two respected artists. In Zucker's (1999) interview with writer/actor Simon Callow, who trained at the Drama Centre, Callow states he feels that nothing is more important than peoples' fundamental sense of the meaning of their lives. He speaks of his interest in psychoanalyst Victor Frankl, whose work on the question of meaning is called Logotherapy. According to Callow, Frankl believed that as long as people found meaning in their lives, their neuroses would either be containable, or might even disappear. Callow says, "And that's what the theatre is about: Enabling you to identify the meaning in your life, if not the meaning of life itself" (p. 36).

And, finally, Lindsay Crouse, (Zucker, 1999) speaks on how we are all filled with wishes, and how as actors we are meant to take ourselves to the edge, go as far as we can. She feels we all need to be told we can shoot for our dreams - that that's what our stories and myths are about. "To take us to the next level, to say life can be better. You can bust through the thing you never thought you could. You can change tomorrow what you thought you couldn't today" (p. 33). I believe that through acting we are enabled to do this.

So, in summary, looking at dramatherapists, psychologists, acting teachers, directors, professional and non-professional actors, there seems to be a general consensus on the healing power of acting. Dramatherapists Emunah, Jennings, Meldrum, and Mitchell all use theatrical models in their work, and emphasize the need for theatre skills. Meldrum and Mitchell in particular focus on the necessity of a truthful way of working. I have mentioned the work of director Peter Brook, renowned for his organic, process-

oriented methods, and a strong influence on many theatre-oriented dramatherapists.

Acting teachers Hagen, Adler, and Meisner, acknowledged as three of the greatest teachers this past century, each have created methods derived from Stanislavsky's truthful acting work, and they also acknowledge the link between therapy and acting, and the influence of psychology on their work. Psychologist Bates even believes actors are in a sense psychologists themselves, having much to teach us. Finally, I have cited actors like Atkins, Grant, Crouse, Brando, as well as non-professionals who have felt the profound healing effects of acting in their lives. I would conclude that organic acting techniques, within a theatrical model in dramatherapy, could be viable and exciting therapeutic tools.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEATRICAL BACKGROUND**

In this chapter I would like to talk about my training and past experience as an actor, and acting teacher, how my own methods and beliefs have evolved, and how they have influenced my present thoughts on dramatherapy, pointing me in the direction I would like to go in this field.

When I decided at an early age to be an actor, it surprised those who knew me, as I was quite an introverted child. Having a talent for drawing and writing, these seemed more appropriate creative outlets for my personality. Yet, acting allowed me to express myself in ways that I simply could not have done in my life. In my early school years, lacking the confidence to audition for leads in plays, I was usually cast in secondary roles, playing character parts, often witches, and villains. This was actually wonderful for me, as I was able to tap into, and safely express darker sides of myself, whereas in life I was a congenial, and fairly obedient child. So speaking therapeutically, I was really making my first forays into dramatherapy at an early age.

In addition to the unconscious therapeutic aspect of acting, I began to truly love the art itself. After making my professional debut at the Provincetown Playhouse, Massachusetts, and completing my B.A. in Drama at McGill University, I decided to audition for the British acting schools. I felt my university training had taught me very little about the art of acting, and had consisted predominantly of theatre games that I found either intimidating or boring, and had nothing to do with creating a role, honestly or truthfully.

In England I was disillusioned with the acting schools that allowed one a timed three minutes to do two audition pieces, without an interview. It was with some relief, arriving at East 15, to find the audition was several hours long, working alone, then with a group, and with a lengthy interview. When I was accepted, I felt I had found the perfect acting training for me.

East 15 grew out of director Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, a company renowned for its Stanislavsky-based improvisational work. The first year at East 15, of an intensive three year program, was designed to have the student work on himself, the tenet being that you cannot be a good actor until you first examine yourself, your desires, hates, belief systems, good and bad qualities, etc. On the back of a recent prospectus are the words "Truth, Courage, Risk, Know Thyself." The belief was that in order to understand human behaviour, and be a good artist, one had to first clear oneself of destructive habits and patterns. I was excited to find that the philosophy somehow connected and resounded with my lifelong interest in healing. Rather than say (as many artists believe) 'one must keep one's neuroses in order to create' (i.e., all great artists are mad), the thinking was that one must clear oneself of one's neuroses in order to create truthfully, be a clear channel for characters to come through. Otherwise, one would play the same neurotic character over and over again, a variation of oneself that one had never really examined or understood.

Needless to say, my years at East 15 were exceptionally productive and fulfilling ones, and gave me a philosophy of art and living that has stayed with me. I learned about living moment to moment, and acting from the inside out, using my emotional life as

genuinely as possible.

Returning to Canada, I was then most fortunate to study with Robert Fried, a gifted teacher and director who had trained at the Drama Centre, in London, the only other method-oriented school in England at the time, and my second choice as a place to train. While East 15 had given me a philosophy, and a solid organic way of doing improvisational work, the Drama Centre work gave me additional acting techniques that grounded my text work and made it emotionally consistent, rather than hit or miss. One did not just depend on the mood of the moment. One had solid techniques to consistently help one tap into one's emotional life, in a way that would honestly serve the text.

Several years later, after many years as a performer, I was fortunate once again, to meet Paul Bardier, an expert on the work of Sanford Meisner. I have touched on Meisner's work in the previous chapter. Again, it is an organic way of working, and grew out of Meisner's involvement with the Group Theatre in New York, in the 1930's. Meisner's work is Stanislavsky-based, but modernized, and taken further. Meisner (1986) said, "My biggest job in teaching you as actors is to bring you together with yourself. That's the root of creative acting." (p. 160) and "Don't be an actor. Be a human being. Don't give a performance. Let the performance give you" (p. 128).

Again, I felt, as in all organic creative work, his method though geared to actors, was intensely therapeutic as well. I felt that if one could be as 'present' in life, as one was when acting truthfully, this would be a healthy and fulfilling way to live.

I initially studied The Meisner Technique with Paul, and eventually began to teach with him. We taught for several years, predominantly in Toronto, and in London,

England. As our classes evolved, another ingredient was incorporated. We found ourselves adding meditation and visualization exercises, usually as warmups, but sometimes they lasted for a good part of the class. People not only opened up creatively as a result of these warmups, but they were healing on a personal level for students as well, relaxing and centering. The therapeutic element in the work was getting stronger, and this excited me tremendously. I had studied various forms of healing over the years, as had Paul, and some of those techniques seemed useful and beneficial. In London, I had studied guided visualization and spiritual development with Jenny Grant, and Robin Winbow at The College of Psychic Studies. My main interest and study, though, had been with renowned healer Geoff Boltwood (1994), who works with energy fields, and sound.

I later continued to teach my own classes in Montreal, first with professional actors, then with aspiring professionals at Dawson College, and the National Theatre School, and finally with non-professionals who loved acting, and simply wanted a creative and fulfilling experience in their lives. It was this group that eventually led me to dramatherapy.

Acting is a difficult and competitive field, and I have always been aware, when teaching, that only a very small number of students might achieve great success in the profession. But my training at East 15 had shown me that even those who never became professional actors, thought of the training as deeply enriching and life-enhancing. Though scattered around the world, most of my group has stayed in touch for twenty years, and I still count many among my closest friends. Curiously, several have gone into

the helping professions, becoming healers, homeopaths, and therapists. And, students from classes have instigated their own creative work. The Ring Theatre Company grew out of Robert Fried's class, the Beacon Theatre out of Paul Bardier's, as well as our own company, Bardkin, which produced new plays on both sides of the Atlantic. So, acting training, from my experience, had generated therapeutic and creative benefits in the wider sense of the word.

My non-professional class grew out of a workshop I had been asked to give at an amateur theatre company. Most of the participants had been involved on the technical side, doing costumes, props, etc. Some wanted to act, but did not have the courage to audition. Others just wanted a creative experience, or to improve their self-esteem in their personal lives. The age range in the group was twenty to sixty, and included students, housewives, and business people. But, despite a variety of backgrounds and ages, organic acting brings people together very quickly, and a high level of trust was soon generated. People began to open creatively and emotionally in ways I do not think they believed themselves capable of. One woman in particular, who had a very difficult personal history, and really needed to rebuild her sense of self, eventually began to audition for amateur companies around the city, and is now doing astonishingly good work.

I began to see how therapeutic this work could be, but again, it was only therapeutic I felt, or much more deeply so, when the work was truthful, had a solid foundation, and used techniques which enabled one to safely explore one's emotional life. whether we were doing structured improvisation, or work on text. Acting that was more

on the surface, more play-oriented, could be fun and entertaining, and certainly therapeutic depending on the population, but to me it seemed more like recreational therapy. It did not lead to places in one's psyche and imagination that the more truthful way of working did. This way seemed to have a deeper and longer lasting effect.

Uta Hagen (1973), in Respect for Acting, talks about her early days as an actress, when she used 'tricks' in her work, "manufactured tears and laughter, all the things to do for calculated outer effects" (p. 8), and how she began to dislike acting. Only when she got back to truthful work, did she find the joy in it, as well as giving something genuine to the audience. I believe that 'healing theatre', as Jennings (2000) calls it, is healing both for performer and the audience, the witness. But it is only so when the work is genuine. As Lindsay Crouse (Zucker, 1999) says, "When you see great acting, something happens which changes you, which is so overwhelming you don't have words" (p. 33).

In Chapter Four, I will talk more about the healing power of appropriate role, but I would like to add here, that as a performer, there really has been no role that has not given me in some way, insight, self-understanding, catharsis, or healing. Many have allowed me to explore and express safely, various sides of myself, from the aggressive, to the eccentric, to the fearless, to the vulnerable.

As an example, one role that stands out was that of a morphine addict, based on the playwright's mother. With no personal experience in that area, yet having scenes where I was in withdrawal, and wanting to be as accurate and genuine as possible, I went to many Narcotics Anonymous (N.A.) meetings, and was privileged to speak with many recovering addicts. As difficult as the part was, it was not only cathartic, but also gave



me insights into addiction that I do not believe I could have gleaned as powerfully through research or study. Truly embodying a role can expand one's knowledge, understanding, compassion, and one's own sense of self in a myriad of ways. This is why I believe acting, and appropriate role to be so powerful, and supreme vehicles to be used in dramatherapy.

## CHAPTER 3

### TECHNIQUES

I am attempting to take steps towards creating a theatrical model, with acting exercises that are process oriented and usable in a therapeutic context. The bulk of these exercises would be done in group sessions. They are improv based, i.e., no texts are used, and there is no work on character. Rather, one is working on oneself, and putting oneself in imaginary situations. The improvisations are fairly structured, and set up beforehand by the participants themselves. Though I will discuss in Chapter 4 how the process of character work is therapeutic, I feel strongly that it is first essential to work on oneself. To understand, accept, and believe in oneself is a strongly therapeutic goal.

These techniques are not my invention, though I have been working with my own variations of them for over twenty years. They are Stanislavsky-based, in the sense that they teach an organic way of creatively working from the inside out, and are derived from several teachers, specifically Sanford Meisner, Uta Hagen, and my own work that evolved from East 15 and the Drama Centre. Director Harold Clurman (1957) said, "The first effect of the Stanislavsky System on the Group Theatre actors in the 1930's was that of a miracle. Here at last was a key to that elusive ingredient of the stage, True Emotion" (p. 44).

Though I am focusing on the therapeutic aspects of the exercises, they are also brilliant actor training, and can enhance a client's later performance work, whether autobiographical or text-based. As cited earlier, Emunah and Mitchell have stated that clients in dramatherapy must have a certain level of theatre training in order for this kind

of work to be therapeutic, and certainly for performance work to be.

The exercises are interrelated, and progressive. In conversation with British teacher, Robert Fried, he believes that working through the exercises, one can break through one's limited, readily available self, moving on into the range of one's fuller potential. He also notes, and I would concur, that nothing should be played or demonstrated, but rather lived through, or explored. And, even though many of the exercises have a preset structure, it's crucial to follow one's impulses, even if they lead one in a totally different direction.

I will begin with Meisner's Repetition exercise, or Word Game. As a warm up exercise, I think it is unsurpassed. It is more easily understood when experienced, or observed, as the value of it is better appreciated.

Two people sit in chairs facing each other. Either person can begin by commenting on something observed about the other, such as, on a most basic level, 'You have red hair'. As people get more comfortable with each other, the observations tend to go further, from the physical, 'You're crossing your legs' to the emotional (i.e., 'You feel sad'). The phrase is repeated verbatim by the other person, and is repeated back and forth like a ping pong ball, until one or the other has a genuine impulse or need to say something else. Only then can the phrase be changed. The objective is to respond with how the words make you **feel**. The purpose of the exercise is to get out of our heads, and to respond from our guts. Meisner believes, and I have seen this over and over, and therefore would agree, that the repetition leads to true impulses, not intellectual ones, but emotional ones. When partners know and trust each other, it can be as exciting to watch

as any scripted work. For me, the therapeutic value of the exercise is that it enables one to be truly present, to be in the moment, to listen, to observe, to really communicate, and to allow oneself to respond in a truthful manner. It is designed to lead to improvisational work that will be emotionally genuine, but in itself it is a marvellous exercise. I have observed shy people, for example, come out of themselves and respond with true feelings in a way that has not been possible for them to do in ordinary conversation. As a warm up, it is also great fun, both for participants and observers.

The next exercise that I advocate is the basic Object Exercise. This is an exercise where the client would set up an environment he feels comfortable in, such as a favourite room. He might bring in familiar objects to help create 'his space'. The goal of the exercise is to then complete three different, though connected physical activities, such as getting ready to go out on an important date, and flossing one's teeth, putting on makeup, doing one's hair, for example. The situation should be pleasurable, not traumatic, and the objective should be clear.

This beginner exercise enables one to start being comfortable on stage with observers, especially if later performance work is planned. Self-consciousness will gradually be eased by having a strong objective, and creating a situation, real or imaginary, that one believes in. Belief is enhanced by the client choosing a situation that has meaning for him. The stronger the objective, i.e., the need or want, the more he gets involved in the exercise, and the audience becomes unimportant. (One is not 'playing to them'.)

The next exercise is another object exercise, but with a time limit, i.e., having five

minutes to do the previous activities, because the 'date' is with your favourite movie star, and you cannot be late. This exercise is great fun, and is also a good warm up exercise. Again, it encourages the learning of truthful stage behaviour, and also gives one insights into one's own behaviour in an extreme situation.

In the next exercise, called Sleeping Partner, clients are working in pairs. One partner is 'asleep', and the other must get out of the room without waking up his partner. Again, one creates a situation believable to oneself. One of the therapeutic aspects, for me, is that in creating the situation, the client, consciously or not, is choosing something he needs to work through, or examine. From a therapeutic standpoint, these can be discussed within a session, or not.

A more advanced version of this exercise is Sleeping Partner - Life and Death, i.e., trying to escape from prison, or save someone else's life. The stakes are clearly at the highest level, and the exercise would likely be most useful for those at a performance level.

The next exercise is called Verbal - No Obstacle, and is the first verbal exercise in pairs. Most dramatic scenes or improvs have an obstacle to be overcome. In this early exercise, the participants are simply solving a problem together, like planning a holiday, or choosing a film to see. It is a good exercise for any client group as it gets people comfortable simply working together in a non-confrontational situation. I feel it is a good 'rehearsal for life' exercise.

Following this exercise is a Verbal - Obstacle exercise, the first verbal exercise having dramatic conflict. The obstacle is the partner's objective or need, which directly

contradicts yours. Meisner's structured improvisations work beautifully with obstacle situations, and I will elaborate on this method further on.

What I have not mentioned, but what I feel is essential, is that in all these exercises, there is an imaginary fourth wall that is erected, which clients learn to be aware of. The audience is expected to be respectful and silent when people are working, to help them erect this fourth wall. To me, this gives clients a feeling of privacy that I believe is so necessary in therapeutic work. The client should know that he is not expected to perform or entertain, but live through an imaginary situation to the best of his ability. The fourth wall is almost like a mask, or character, and essential at this stage because one is not playing a character, but being oneself, and the 'wall' creates the distance that is necessary for a feeling of safety and containment.

The next exercise is one of my favourites, and I have found it to be extremely therapeutic, in class situations. It is called Personalization. The exercise deals with relationships, and is a form of role play, and akin to exercises used in psychodrama, but I feel it goes much deeper. The client will pick someone to play an important person in his life that he may have unresolved issues with. He not only chooses someone who reminds him of his father, for example, but spends time briefing him in detail on what his father is like. He will then pick three ways his father makes him feel (i.e., angry, loving, insecure) and then set up a situation that will enable him to explore those feelings, and the relationship. Hopefully, through acting the exercise with a sensitive partner, some of those feelings will be worked through or explored and resolved. As a student, I had a powerful experience doing this exercise, which I will share as an example.

I had someone in the class play an older mentor that I had had, who I had not seen for several years. The relationship felt painfully unresolved. I briefed the man playing him, giving him as much information as possible, and set up a situation where I could explore some of the ways B. made me feel. 'Awestruck', 'intimidated', 'maternal', were likely some of the adjectives I chose. We arranged to 'meet' for coffee after many years, a reunion. I was able to express feelings I needed to, and have a sense of closure and release. It was an exercise I have never forgotten. Why I feel it goes beyond spontaneous role play, or psychodrama, which is directed and manipulated, is that one is using Stanislavsky's 'magic if'. 'If' this were B... 'If' we were meeting for coffee after ten years... One takes the time to prepare and believe in the imaginary circumstances. There is a fourth wall, and non-interference from an audience, or director. I believe that the exercise then has a much greater chance of emotionally 'working' for the client. I have certainly seen excellent results time and time again, with students.

An exercise that usually follows, is one called Endowment. Using the magic 'if', one reacts to his partner as if the partner were not a person but an animal or inanimate object, or possessing an extreme characteristic such as unusual smell or super human powers. By choosing something that has a strong effect on you, you explore how that changes your behaviour. The exercise might be used as a way of working through fears or phobias.

Another exercise which is a variation of Personalization, is to repeat a situation twice with the same partner. The partner does not play any character this time, but you personalize him as two different people with whom you have distinct relationships (i.e.,

boss, or best friend). What is examined is how this one factor alters your behaviour, and could be helpful in terms of working to change behaviour or response to particular individuals.

Generally, with improvisational work, I believe that structured improvs are therapeutically valuable, as the structure allows one containment and a feeling of security. I have found that having that secure base, individuals can really fly with the work. Meisner's improvs, for example, which are very structured, can be wonderfully spontaneous in practice, enabling one to learn to live fully, in the present.

His set-up, which I also use, is to have one person inside the room, doing a physical activity which is crucially important, and which has a time limit (i.e., making a card for a sick child which has to be delivered immediately.) Involvement with the activity in itself is enough to create emotional involvement and belief in the situation. The person outside must emotionally prepare, and comes into the situation, needing the person in the room in order to complete **his** crucial objective (i.e., needing a lift to the airport, because all public transport is on strike.) Again, by choosing situations that are personally meaningful, these exercises can be extremely powerful. One is always attempting to go for truthful behaviour and belief in the circumstances one is creating. If winning the lottery will give you a billion dollars, but that is inconceivable to you, make it a million. As well, everything is geared to help the client make the circumstances believable. Nothing is ever mimed in this work. If a prop is needed, it is brought in. Students have often brought in suitcases of props and clothing, and as a therapist, I would have as much material as possible readily available. Again, the therapy comes out of



truthful behaviour and belief in an imaginary situation, that will instigate the exploration and release of genuine emotions.

Affective Memory and Emotional Memory are two exercises which attempt to access an emotion triggered by a personal past event. In both exercises, the client recreates in as much detail as possible the circumstances that led to an event which affected him emotionally. Emotional Memory goes further in that it attempts to deal with one of the four primary emotions, extreme anger, fear, laughter or tears. The client lies down, with eyes closed, totally relaxed, and recreates the events 'as if' they are happening in the present; everything is seen, tasted, heard, smelt in the present. The involvement at some point usually triggers the emotion. The trigger is often a minor detail, like the blue flower on the wallpaper.

Though I have seen this exercise work powerfully, I have never felt totally comfortable with it as an acting exercise, as it seemed, and still does, much more appropriate as a therapeutic tool. I also feel it is one exercise that might be more successful in individual therapy, unless a group has been together for a long time, and a high level of trust has been established. This is an exercise where deeply buried emotions can be accessed, or released. Somatic therapist Christine Caldwell (1996) talks about the importance of allowing a sensation to evolve into an emotion, and allowing that emotion to be felt fully. She believes that we can "feel feelings all the way, and not only do we not die, when we do, but we feel more alive" (p. 73). Working with trauma victims, she says that recent scientific studies have found that our early life events are stored in the brain as emotions, and in order to retrieve information that cannot be recalled, it is

necessary to return to the situation and re-experience the emotion. The emotion will trigger the memory. The Emotional Memory exercise would be a wonderful tool, I believe, to access repressed memories.

In terms of using Emotional Memory in text work, where it can be later fed, Mitchell (1990) has an interesting perception of it. He talks about the client in a dramatherapy group,

gaining a seed that will illuminate and crystallize the experience, and inspire him long after the group has ended.... The final phase of scene exploration, where the client's character begins to incorporate aspects of his/her own emotional memory, and using full energy to declare it in a scene, is an important part of internalizing this 'therapeutic seed' (p.17).

The last improvisational exercise I would like to discuss is Exploring Yourself as a Character. This exercise is a good lead-in to character and text work, but it is also a marvellous therapeutic exercise as it deals with exploring and perceiving oneself in new ways. It is also enormous fun.

Several smaller exercises are involved as the format is similar to that used when working on a scripted character. I would first have the client write a short autobiography, citing three of the most powerful or important life events or experiences so far. I would then do the exercise, 'If you were an animal, painting, book, instrument, etc., what would you be?' I would then have him make a list of all his characteristics, or as many as he could think of, and then choose two or three of those characteristics, finding a situation that would enable him to explore them (i.e., what situation would bring out my

passionate, courageous, adventurous side?) Perhaps it would be playing an explorer, or a spy. I would then create an improv with a strong objective and action, and see where it would take me. At this stage, I would have the client also find a garment to wear that felt appropriate or empowering, as well as a piece of music to play during the exercise that might be him 'if he were a piece of music'. The exercise is not result oriented in any way, but rather an exploration of oneself.

In this chapter, I have mentioned often Objectives and Actions, as well as reiterating that this work aims for truthful work under imaginary circumstances. Objectives and Actions within structured improv help one to believe in the imaginary reality of the situation. An objective is a strong want or need (i.e., I need to get to the airport because my birth mother is leaving the country in half an hour, and I've spent five years trying to find her.) My action, which involves my partner, would be how to get him to help me (i.e., I can't leave unless he agrees to stay with my child who is ill.) The previous circumstances are always discussed (i.e., where am I coming from, and what has just happened prior to the beginning of the exercise?) Most importantly, what is at stake for me if I do not achieve my objective? Obviously, the stakes should always be high, and the situation has to be plausible and important to one. That is why I feel it is essential for the clients to create the situations themselves, of course, with input from the therapist, if need be. Elements of their lives that are incorporated can be processed afterwards, if necessary, either individually, or within the session.

A final, but essential ingredient in the improv cake is Preparation, how one emotionally prepares for the imaginary scenario. Again, this is personal territory, and

unique to each individual (i.e., playing a character who is separated from her son, having no son, I might prepare by imagining, or 'substituting' my nephew being taken from me.) A good director, or therapist should always be helpful and forthcoming with ideas to help individuals prepare.

These, then, are some of the exercises I would use in a theatre model that was therapeutically oriented. They would, of course, vary depending on the population involved, and/or the needs of the client groups. The parameters of this paper prevent me from going deeper and further in explanation, or in adding additional exercises, though I feel these are a good beginning, and give an overview of the direction I would go in with this work. In the conclusion, I will elaborate on how to incorporate this work into a theatrical model.

So, again, therapeutically, these exercises work on several levels.

- a) They enable one to explore oneself, and learn about oneself in a myriad of ways.
- b) They encourage one, through imaginary circumstances, which create a sense of safety, to explore and work through fears, desires, dreams, as well as situations which could be 'rehearsals for life', such as an encounter with a boss, for example.
- c) They help clients to learn to communicate on a deep and honest level with each other, which often spills over into their other relationships. As well, the friendships that I have seen formed in acting classes are supportive and lasting.
- d) The exercises are simply great fun, which in itself can be healing.
- e) They are sound acting training, and will enable clients, should they wish, to go

further creatively, using scripts with confidence, and having the foundation to work on text, and on characters. Character and role work is also profoundly therapeutic.

- f) This work inspires and creates confidence. It is not talent that is important or necessary, but the honest attempt that is acknowledged and lauded. The curious by-product is that extraordinary abilities and talents often do begin to emerge and flourish.
- g) I believe improvisational work is the foundation in all fields of creativity, and is a key, in terms of healing.

Composer Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990) says, “The heart of improvisation is the free play of consciousness as it draws, writes, paints, and plays the raw material emerging from the unconscious.” (p. 9), and “The creative process is a spiritual path. This adventure is about us, about the deep self ... about that which is fully and originally ourselves.” (p. 13).

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PERSONAL PROCESS**

In this chapter I explore 'acting as healing' from my present perspective of actor/dramatherapist, by charting my own process as I create a dramatic piece. I discuss the therapeutic benefits of working on text, and of doing character work, a natural extension of improvisational work. Improv techniques are, in a sense, a prelude to text work, giving one the foundation to do text and character work. Improvs are also often used when working on text to explore elements of the character's world.

I also discuss the topic of role, and how I believe that playing an appropriate role at the right time can be therapeutic. The research paradigm becomes essentially heuristic here, in that I look at why I have chosen to play this role now, as well as giving the background and history of this character, plus my past research into Katharine Butler Hathaway's life.

I discuss elements of the creative process (i.e., how one works on a character and uses the techniques I have discussed earlier.) Lastly, through selected journal excerpts, I will chart my creative process in order to discover how the process has been healing for me, and how I can incorporate my findings and insights into my dramatherapy work.

I believe improvisational work is the foundation of acting, and an essential part of using acting in a therapeutic context. I believe that initial improv work should be about using oneself in imaginary situations, and later moving on to role play, i.e., playing a boss, bank robber, medieval knight, etc. But the text is always made up, and there is no specific character work.

Text and character work add another dimension to acting. One must use one's own emotions obviously, but Blanche Dubois or Richard III are likely very different from me in terms of history, background, life experiences, characteristics. At the same time, we probably have many emotional responses in common. Therapeutically, playing a character allows one to really explore sides of oneself, often untapped, through the safety and mask of playing someone else. In a way it may seem easier and safer than initial improv work. Often in classes, beginner actors want to have a text, as improvisation appears intimidating at first because one is openly using oneself without a script to fall back on. Practice quickly diminishes these fears.

### **On Role**

Zucker (1999) interviews Jane Lapotaire, who believes that you attract parts to you that you need. At the January 2001 Canadian Governor General awards, opera singer and recipient Teresa Stratas said that she loves creating characters because it gives her the opportunity to get out of her own skin for awhile. In Chapter 2, I have cited several actors, like Lee Grant and Lindsay Crouse, who acknowledge how specific roles at certain times in their lives has been immensely cathartic and healing.

As an acting teacher I have experienced how giving students the right role has been enormously therapeutic for them, even though the goal at the time was artistic. Consequently, as a dramatherapist, I feel it is very important to allow clients to play parts that will be of benefit to them in terms of their healing and growth. For example, I once gave the part of Laura in The Glass Menagerie to an extremely shy girl. The character

Laura is pathologically shy. Ordinarily, with someone shy, I might give him a strong or extroverted character to play, in order to draw him out. But with this girl, being able to play a character that was very close to her in terms of personality type, allowed her to act with growing confidence as she did not have to make a huge emotional stretch. At that point, to do so would not have been possible for her. Playing Laura was safe for her, as it was a character she related to and understood, and her confidence grew simply in performing before the group. Another very introverted woman was given very strong characters to play as I felt she was ready to explore her strength. She was a natural leader, but physical abuse had crushed her self-esteem. Through playing powerful characters, she truly blossomed, both in her creative work and in her life.

Mitchell (1990) relates how a client with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) was challenged by the spontaneity of playing a drunk in a Coward vignette. He states,

The safety of rehearsal, and being 'in character' allowed this patient the opportunity to dare do something which as himself he wouldn't risk. The work on character became the therapeutic agent in a similar way as using metaphor, mask, or myth.... The client discovers when being another 'character' that it is safe to be open, to be vulnerable, to express anger, to cry, or to be assertive (p. 16, 17).

So as a dramatherapist, it seems essential when working with character and text to be as attuned as possible to the client's needs.

Are there criteria for knowing a character is therapeutically right for a client? I do not begin to suggest that one can ever know absolutely. I agree with Carl Rogers who believed that clients need to go at their own rhythm, and should not be "pushed into



dismantling their defences” (Mitchell, 1998, p. 6). Therefore, I would never force a client into a role he/she felt remotely uncomfortable with. As this method of working would not be considered short term, one criteria, or way is that simply through getting to know clients, and seeing their improv work over the months, by the time one gets to scene work, one should know these people very well. And ideally, the dramatherapist, having a good theatrical knowledge of plays, would be able to choose the appropriate role for the client. The prior improv work, when done fully, is so intensive, a client’s limitations, abilities, and needs are soon apparent.

Another choice, as a dramatherapist, particularly if the group has been together for some time, and the play has been decided, is to let the clients themselves choose the roles that they are drawn to. This happened to me only once, at drama school, when we were working on three plays by Shaw. I desperately wanted to play Eliza Doolittle, and was allowed to do so. Though I have never analyzed what unconscious need drove me to that request, it was definitely the most fulfilling experience, creatively and emotionally, that I had in those three years. I believe that one should trust a client’s instincts, as in both the theatre and in therapy, the process should be a collaborative one.

Finally, I believe it ultimately comes down to trusting one’s own knowledge and intuition as a dramatherapist. By not imposing one’s agenda, but by being as present as possible, trusting the process, and taking one’s lead from the client, I feel the right role for the client will be chosen. And, as work on scenes normally lasts about six weeks, there are always new characters for a client to explore, to go further with.

I am also extremely interested in clients writing and creating their own material.

Work on a monologue, for example, might be autobiographical, or totally fabricated. If it is autobiographical, and the client is not ready to work openly on the material within the group, the story can be disguised, or filtered through a created character. From working on my own performance piece, as well as from past work with clients, I have found that writing, for many, is enormously therapeutic, and can greatly enhance and expand the whole dramatherapy process.

### **Techniques and Character Work**

I would like to discuss how some of the techniques I talked about earlier can be transferred and utilized in character work, and how this is valuable therapeutically. As I have said, I believe that working on a character allows one the freedom to safely go very deep on an emotional level. Resolving the character's issues, often helps one examine one's own.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe in depth a hypothetical rehearsal process, especially as every rehearsal process, and therapy group is unique. One could never, and would not wish to plan everything ahead. But I would like to touch on some of the techniques I have mentioned that could be applied to text and character work.

My own rehearsal process was slightly different, as it was a solo piece, and I worked a great deal on my own. If I were working with a client group on a play, after a physical and vocal warmup, I would likely start rehearsals with Meisner's Word Game. Next, the exercise Exploring Yourself as a Character, would become Exploring the Character. I would have the client write an autobiography as his/her character, list

characteristics. find his/her animal, find and wear a garment through rehearsal that felt right, choose a piece of music, bring in personal objects for the character, etc. Then a situation would be set up, and doing the Basic Object Exercise, the client would explore the character through an important situation the character might find himself in. This would ideally be a situation 'before the play begins'. The exercise allows the client to find the character in a deeper way.

I would also have the client find an image for the character. Who does he/she remind you of: a friend, relative, celebrity, historical figure? This gives one a point of departure, a spring board in a sense, into the character.

The Personalization Exercise, for me, is one of the most important exercises used therapeutically in character work. I would have the client go through the script and list all the other characters his character has relationships with. Then I would have him 'personalize' those characters as people from his own life. For example, if I were playing Hamlet, I would ask myself if there was someone in my own life, or past, who infuriated me the way Claudius does Hamlet, and then personalize the actor playing Claudius, (i.e., if Claudius were 'that person from my life'.)

In rehearsals, extensive improvisations are done, particularly on the characters' relationships, before the text is even touched on. When the script is finally examined, the characters and relationships have been found more deeply. Therapeutically, I feel Personalization allows one to work through personal situations and relationships **through** one's character, and through one's relationships with the other characters.

In this sense, Substitution is also very important (i.e., Lindsay Crouse's confessing

'in her mind'. something personal from her own life, when she was playing a character confessing something completely different in a trial scene.) Using one's Emotional Memory here is also appropriate, and can be extremely cathartic (i.e., I may never have been a battered wife, if playing such a character, but may have the emotional memory of being bullied as a child.) Feeding my own memory into the scene can help me work through the emotions that the memory induces. These personal memories (therapeutically) might be shared with the group or therapist at a later time, or not, depending on the client's needs and wishes. Jennings (2000), has talked of the creative experience itself often being healing enough for the client, without the need to analyze it. I will elaborate on this later, when processing my own creative experience.

Also with text, as with improv work, each scene is broken down, each character finding his Objective and Action within each scene. And, as with improv work, Preparation for each scene is essential (i.e., how one gets oneself into the appropriate emotional state for that particular scene).

I would also have the clients ask what the character's Super-objective in the play is, and beyond the situation of the play, the character's Super-objective in Life. This often has some connection with the client's own Super-objective in life, that he may not even be aware of, or have realized, or articulated before.

As I have said, the process of working on character and text is a rich, varied, and involved process, and as unique to each group as the therapeutic process. The above are some beginning guidelines for working on characters with a therapeutic intent.

## On Creating a Character

For this project, I chose to create my own dramatic piece, based on the life and work of the writer, Katharine Butler Hathaway. I have been drawn to her writing, and her life story, since first encountering her books in the mid-eighties. As I am also interested in clients not only working on existing texts, but writing their own material, I felt it would be exciting and fruitful to take this path myself (i.e., not only portray this character, but also write the piece myself.) In this way, I could explore what aspects of her life I was drawn to, and how her life experiences connected to my own. In terms of choosing an appropriate role, the timing felt absolutely right for me to work on Katharine. Therapeutically, I was interested in seeing how I could examine some of my own issues through acting some of hers. Curiously, our life experiences could not be further apart, but I related strongly to her on an emotional level.

Katharine Butler Hathaway was born in New England in 1890, and died there in 1942. At the age of five she contracted tuberculosis of the spine, and for ten years was strapped down to her bed, in the hope that she might develop normally. She was a gifted artist and writer from an early age, and was determined to become a writer, believing that she would be prevented from experiencing love, marriage or children, because of her physical deformity. Through enormous courage, faith and determination, she managed to live an extraordinary life, not only becoming a celebrated writer, but also a respected artist, and a much loved aunt, friend, sister, mentor, and wife. Her celebrated autobiography, The Little Locksmith, was continually handed out to patients by doctors such as Karl Menninger, who found it moving and inspiring.

This book, when I first discovered it, inspired me to track down existing family members who kindly shared information and stories about Katharine. Because of time considerations, the piece I have written is approximately thirty minutes, which necessitated me focusing very specifically on just a few areas of her life. I have long been intrigued by the fact that much of Katharine's writing disappeared after her death. In my short play, I have her returning to earth as a Spirit, in the present, to try and find out what happened to her writing. Connected to this quest is her need to resolve issues with the two people she was closest to on earth, her husband and her older brother.

The piece was written as part of a class in the Theatre Department at Concordia University, called "Solo Workshop". Development of the script, and rehearsals, took place working with a director, and a dramaturge. I presented the piece in a workshop format, to a small audience in the Cazalet Theatre at Concordia, April 4, 2001.

### **Journal Excerpts**

As this paper has a heuristic bent, I feel it would be interesting and worthwhile to include excerpts from the journal I kept for seven months, in order to chart my creative process. Part of that process has been the emergence of thoughts and ideas on dramatherapy within a theatrical model, alongside notes on creating a performance piece. In a way, therefore, it is an expanded version of my usual 'working on a character' notebook - a record of what I am exploring as a therapist, in combination with myself as artist. I have titled the journal "An actor/dramatherapist journal."

### *October 2000*

Memory of my grandmother, years ago, when I said that I wanted to be an actor, and matriarch that she was, ruler of rulers, queen of queens, she said, “Why would you want to be Someone Else? Don’t you want to be Yourself?” And I replied, “But in becoming other people, I find myself, I learn about myself, I Expand myself.”

### *October*

Rogers, on how the subjective private world of the person is one of the very best ways of understanding them. How true acting plummets you into your private world, through the character’s world. And how learning to empathize, to merge in a sense, with a character, can enable one also to better empathize with clients. One learns to expand one’s ability to See, as Stella Adler said.

And thinking as well today, that helping people to live in a creative way, being open to life the way the artist is, is a wondrous thing. Not imposing a way of perceiving the world on clients, but creating a space for them to find their own unique way, rhythm, and way of being in the world.

Thinking of Martha Graham, her wonderful book, Blood Memory. “Then comes the cultivation of the being from which whatever you have to say comes. The main thing of course, always is the fact that there is only one of you in the world, just one, and if that is not fulfilled then something has been lost.”

A task of the dramatherapist is to enable people to become who they are.

### *October*

Re-reading Kitty (Katharine Butler Hathaway), and how her amazing book is

totally self-revelatory. And yet she does leave things out (i.e., Dan, her husband, and Tosh, her first love...) Some things can't be written about, as open and honest as she is. I find it interesting that though I'm not doing my own self-rev. performance, I'm adapting the work of someone who is famous for her autobiography. And I'm writing about the things that she couldn't.

### ***October***

I believe that rehearsal must be process-oriented. Glenda Jackson hated performing, loved rehearsal. In rehearsal, as in therapy, one can change, explore. One should do that in performance as well, dare to dare, but it's much more difficult not to play it safe, takes ability and courage - leaping across chasms. If in performance, one is result-oriented, process gets thrust aside. The gratification one gains from audience acknowledgement - whether genuine or spurious, is short-lived. Acknowledgement needs to come from oneself. Living the process helps it come from oneself.

### ***October***

On creating a character. You need to fall in love with your character, know that person. Connecting deeply with them, becoming them, in a sense, can help you uncover untold aspects of yourself. Through a character one is free to express fears, desires, dreams, however outrageous. Thinking of parts I've played, and how they've helped me heal, and grow, even though the goal was not therapeutic but artistic. There is something very healing in striving to create great art.

### ***November***

The similarities between the creative process and the therapeutic process. Like



layers of onion. Peeling away till you get to your core, your essence. And I believe the creative and the therapeutic paths are both connected as well to the spiritual path. Not a striving to connect to something greater, but a knowing, believing that you are connected.

### ***November***

Artists fear therapy - many of them, feel that their neuroses directly connect to their talent. Kitty believed that psychoanalysis improved her art, her writing, didn't diminish her talent, but freed her. This was in the 30's.

### ***December***

Landy in article, "Future Directions in Research", talks about the healthy human being as the seeker of balance, that the dysfunctional person is off-balance.

Ironically, the creative process requires one to 'knock oneself off balance', or 'off-centre' as I call it, in order to emotionally prepare for a scene. Then re-centering oneself within the scene, through going for a strong objective, is what provides the catharsis that often spills over into one's life, and helps one to become or feel more 'centered', more 'balanced'.

### ***Tuesday, January 2***

Started more intensive work on Kitty. Went through boxes of notes, research notes, K.'s letters to her mother during her years in Paris. Like meeting an old friend with some trepidation and guilt for having stayed away for so long. When you're playing someone who existed, there's more material to choose from that's factual. You're not making as much up. And yet your 'union' still does create a whole new character. Like a birth.

The difficulties of creating a character truthfully, and analyzing the process at the same time. Recent interview in the Sunday Times with Alan Bates and Eileen Atkins, about 'actor's mysteries, secrets', how analysis of what you're doing prevents you doing it. Bates - "You'd lose an awful lot of your mystery, spontaneity, natural instincts if you watch yourself, stand outside yourself, analyze yourself". The heuristic challenge - difficult but not impossible, the research versus artist dilemma. Plunge fully. Experience. And Then analyze it.

### ***Wednesday January 3***

Would love to work as a dramatherapist, helping people write and perform monologues, either their story through a character, or just creating a character. The personal will come through. Or creating a monologue around a character they would Love to be. To experience being their Ideal person.

### ***Thursday January 4***

Went through an old draft and started to pick out, rescue any worthwhile bits, chunks. Some new bits started to come through. Some new ideas, directions to go in - like little shoots.

### ***Tuesday January 9***

First Solo Workshop class. Interesting how questions kept coming up about how to write or adapt personal material. Almost taken for granted that in a one person show the character would be based on oneself. Made me realize that most, especially young writers, tend to write about themselves, need to process their own issues, through art.

Then wondered if I can explore what I need to, through Kitty. I know the answer

is yes. Just feeling cowardly in terms of the writing challenge. I realize that for me, writing is as therapeutically a part of the process as acting, and I make my stakes high as an artist. As therapist I'm kinder to myself. As an artist I want the piece to be Good Writing. Stand on its own.

***Wednesday January 10***

Character questions for Kitty. Why am I back here? (I have her returning 60 years after her death). Why am I telling my story? Why to this audience? What's at stake for me? Is there a time limit? What am I here to learn? Why have I returned after all this time? What's my Objective? My Superobjective? Who am I Now? How have I changed since I was last on earth? What am I here to learn, to discover? What do I hope for? What do I want to come away with? How will the experience change me? "I" meaning Kitty. Working on a character, She becomes I from the beginning.

Note to myself - to write K.'s autobiography.

***Thursday January 11***

Finding the research process and the creative process happening simultaneously. This piece needs doing. I discovered Kitty years ago. Why do her Now? Perhaps it didn't happen before, because something in me wasn't ready. There is a part of me that would love to do something more contemporary and fun - all glitz, and flash, and shock. K. is mellow and past, and dream-time, but still so powerful, so ocean deep.

The sense of homecoming to K.'s world.

***Friday January 12***

Time factors unnerve me. The piece will be just 20 - 40 minutes long, even if I

expand it later, which I hope to. How can I encapsulate K.'s essence and the poignant and powerful starpoints in her life?

To write about all this is so different, extensive in a way, to my normal creative process. An additional wing to the house, this analysis. What's helpful, healing about it, is that it gives me mini-anchors. Weights me down a bit within the process. Like Virginia Woolf saying, "One gains a hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down." I hear a voice saying, 'Just plunge, F. Plunge.'

### ***Sunday January 14***

I immersed myself in Kitty's writing this weekend. Came out reeling. Back in Castine, Maine, and Paris. My own memories of Castine and Blue Hill wrapped up with hers. Wonderful that I've been in both houses she describes. That I can 'see' the places she loved so.

Some of K.'s characteristics - Naive, vulnerable, loving, sardonic, humble, maternal, enclosing, creative, sharply intelligent, intuitive, loyal, and on, and on. Just a beginning.

### ***Friday January 19***

The immersion continues as I get deeper and deeper into K.'s world. Today I had to shake it off afterwards. Shake my hands. Shake it out. Her pain. You discover things as you create. Picking up on someone's energy, essence, when you work on a character who actually lived. Zoe Caldwell talks about being overwhelmed sometimes, playing Lillian Hellman. Fortunately K.'s energy is one I love being around. Very healing, for the most part.

*Saturday January 27*

A revelation of sorts. Reading Nachmanovich and Anne Wilson Schaeff. That part of what is healing about playing K. is that she is mentor, role model, and friend, and very inspirational. But because I am also, in a sense, the 'wounded healer', and am not always yet living fully what I advocate, I am likely drawn to K. because despite often insurmountable odds, she made vast strides towards living fully what she believed, even though she never felt she did, or felt she accomplished what she set out to do. And I can relate to that. And the necessity, crucial necessity of the 'healer' to continually work on herself. Otherwise the therapeutic relationship is not truthful, is somehow imbalanced. Schaeff talks of needing new paradigms for therapists.

And reading quote of Henry Miller on turning points, on transformation, which is also so Kitty, so the artist, and so human. He writes about a turning point, a rebirth into Self. "My life itself became a work of art. I had found a voice, I was whole again. The experience was much like what we read of in connection with the lives of Zen initiates. My huge failures were like a recapitulation of the experience of the race. I had to grow foul with knowledge, realize the futility of everything, smash everything, grow desperate, then humble, then sponge myself off the slate as it were, in order to recover my authenticity. I had to arrive at the brink, and then take a leap in the dark."

This to me says everything of the artist's journey, the therapeutic journey, the human journey.

The creative process is a healing therapeutic journey, and a spiritual journey. The artist yearns to know the meaning of existence, to become whatever God he/she believes

in. Most of us do - the artist just dares to leap in the dark, and sometimes leads the way.

Kitty's obsession with the magic of transformation, of turning pain into joy, dung into gold. How art helps us do this. Nachmanovich - "The least mark on the paper becomes an act of supreme courage in which the suffering of the artist and his world are alchemized into something quite different - a thing of beauty and wonder."

### ***Friday February 2***

Thinking about how the writing and acting process is inseparable for me in terms of the healing process. It's all one. I'm writing, I hope, what illuminates K. but my choices, even if unconscious, are also what I need to express.

What powerfully occurred to me this morning is that K.'s recurring theme, image, metaphor is the bird in the cage, not knowing that the door is open all the time, and she kept trying to liberate herself from the cage, and urging everyone else to. And my awareness of my own cages, and the constant, on-going self-liberation.

As Kitty says, "Why do we cling to suffering? Why do we resist the vitality of healing?" I think of this in terms of clients, and of the human condition.

### ***Saturday February 10***

I continue to be overwhelmed by the fact that when creating a piece, the connections you make to your own life, consciously or not, are amazing. How much from my own life is being brought up, through working on K.'s. I'm making it conscious. Some of her relationships seem to parallel some of mine, though this is partly my acting process, and the people I'm using as personalizations.

***Sunday February 11***

Finished the first draft. Interesting to see what I chose to put in, and how the scenes connect to my life, though the circumstances of her life and mine couldn't be further apart. It's more that some of the emotional responses are the same, and the bond that's created when you connect with a character. As well as the prior character work. Having looked at characteristics, and at what you have in common with this character, and why you're drawn to her, if you are.

***Tuesday February 20***

Writer Anne Lamott says that writing is about learning to be conscious. So is Acting.

To learn to be conscious. What a phrase. To learn to be more alive. What can be more healing, more life affirming than that?

***Wednesday March 7***

Lots happening. Internal transformation. Meetings, rehearsals, heavy dreams. Difficulty writing last scene, where K. plunges into the fire to confront her brother. Facing my own fears of 'jumping into the fire'. The fire is the cage of our own making, as K. so often says.

***Wednesday March 14***

Rehearsal. Prepared as much as possible, felt I rushed, but in spite of that, had/found some good moments. Places where I left myself alone, and just allowed myself to feel what the words were making me feel. Preparation is essential.

***Monday March 19***

Finished my play, reelingly over the weekend. Still not satisfied with the ending. Good parts, yes, but I want everything to be both explosive and seamless. How like me.

***Thursday March 29***

Not enough rehearsal. Have to work on my own. Performance-presentation next week.

Today, early morning walk, beautiful day. - Felt as K. might - Alive - Happy - Seeing the world afresh, as if for the first time. Perceiving it, and loving it - anew. Every time I even read the script aloud, there is a shift, a knowledge, deep emotional waves.

***Thursday April 5***

Did My Piece, And It Went Really Well! The excitement I felt made me realize I'd cleared blocks - leapt through several hoops of fire. Though it was a very preliminary performance, and could be taken much further, with rewrites, and more extensive rehearsal, it gave me what I needed, in terms of a healing, and therapeutic experience. Artistically, I was able to see/feel where it Could go, and that was enough for now. That was immensely satisfying.

In a way, I felt I'd broken out of the cage, - the fire. I could let something go. I could move on.

**Performance Piece Summary**

Before further examining my experience, I feel it would be helpful to briefly summarize the piece I wrote. It was a thirty minute, tightly packed second draft, complete



in itself. though bursting to expand into a full length play.

The piece begins with Kitty, in the present, finding herself back in her beloved house in Maine, sixty years after her death. She is overwhelmed with joy, knowing she has been sent back to find out where her writing disappeared to after she 'left', and also to resolve issues with several people she was close to. She begins to reminisce, and the play takes her through some of the most poignant times in her life, from her 'prison' years as a child where she was an invalid for ten years, through her teens and into adulthood. Touched on are her first love, her years in Paris, her marriage, the struggles and joys of writing her books, and finally, an encounter with her adored brother. In the final scene she is allowed to go back thirty years and see how her brother died, accidentally by fire. She must confront him about her writing, and can only reach him by plunging into the fire herself. She does, and learns what she needs to, as a frighteningly powerful confession sheds light on their close relationship. She is finally able to leave him, and come out of the fire, which for her is like leaving 'the cage' the strongest metaphor in her writing. She is finally, truly, free.

### **Examining the Process**

In examining how this creative process has been therapeutic for me, in order to discover what will also be healing for others, many thoughts and feeling arise. In a way, I feel slightly split, as there have been two processes happening simultaneously, the artistic one, and the researcher/therapist one. I have certainly experienced the healing process, but in setting out to analyse it, I find that while many aspects I definitely can, others are

more intangible.

I will begin with what I have found, by asking the dominant question and attempting to answer it. 'How has this process been creatively therapeutic for me?'

- a) By 'finding a character I was totally drawn to', and wanted to play, the wheels, in a sense, were more easily set in motion (i.e., there was already a strong empathy and connection to Katharine.)
- b) 'Writing the piece myself', I was able to extract from Katharine's life the events that fascinated me, and that I wanted to act, whether they in any way, consciously or not, connected to my own life. Though most of the scenes were based on actual events in her life, some events are used as points of departure, and so several scenes are totally fabricated, coming from my own imagination.
- c) 'Going deeply emotionally' - having scenes where I could tap into my own emotional life, and/or empathize strongly with her, I was able to experience and express a range of emotions, from sorrow, shock, anger, loneliness, to surprise, excitement, and profound joy.
- d) Having the security of 'using solid acting techniques', I was more easily able to plunge deeply on an emotional level. Specifically, I used strong Objectives in each scene, and made my Stakes very high. I used Substitution, and my own Emotional Memories, as well as Personalizations (i.e., using people from my own life 'as if' they were the characters in the play).
- e) I also 'examined some of my own issues through enacting hers'. I relate to Katharine very much as an artist, and feel we have many creative perceptions in common.

Some of my relationships very obliquely parallel hers. As a woman, an artist, and as a therapist, I am strongly drawn to her fascination with cages, and 'freeing oneself'. I am greatly inspired by her life, and her writing, and feel I have grown by becoming her through acting. At the end of the piece, through Kitty's liberation, I had a sense of my own liberation.

f) Rehearsing and performing the piece also helped me 'rediscover the joys of acting', as I realized again how it centres one, how when you are acting truthfully you live absolutely in the Present, moment to moment, in a way most of us rarely do in life, unless in extreme emotional situations. Being 'alive to the instant', as Martha Graham said, I believe, teaches us how to Live.

g) Finally, fulfilling this creative project 'gave me a sense of pride and accomplishment, enhancing my self-esteem'. I felt I had developed a good piece of writing, and acted it well.

What I found difficult as I tried to analyze the therapeutic benefits of my creative process, is that I realized that there is only so far one can go, or indeed is impelled to go. I feel as if I have discovered a great deal, but though the researcher longs to go into minute detail, to go further would be like pulling off the butterfly's wings in order to comprehend its beauty and way of flying. Elements of the creative process, like the therapeutic process, are delicate, mysterious, and often intangible. In art, or in therapy, things cannot always be tied up neatly, simplified, categorized, or diagnosed. The intangible in the creative and therapeutic processes must be trusted, once the groundwork has been laid, and the process evolves uniquely in each creative situation, and in each

therapeutic encounter. For example, I may long to play Hamlet, because 'I understand a parent's betrayal', or 'I might relate to his bereavement', or perhaps 'empathize with his inability to make decisions and act on them', or even shades of all three. Who knows?

I now feel it is in the client's Doing that the essential therapy or 'working through' occurs, more than in the analysis or dissection of the problem. In other words, if you solve it creatively, the therapy will take care of itself. If you dissect it therapeutically, you may kill the ability to act it, which would have been the essence of the therapy.

In conversation with Sue Jennings at the NADT Conference, November, 2000, she told me that she never analyzes a client's creative experience, 'even if they want to'. She believes the healing comes simply out of the creative experience itself, and not in analyzing it afterwards, or connecting it to a person's life. Having gone through the process myself, though I still believe I would consider a client's needs and wishes, I do tend to agree with her. "What makes dramatherapy so powerful and unique," is, as Jennings (2000) says, "the client's relationship with the art form" (p.9).

So though I set out as researcher wanting to analyze everything intricately, I ultimately found it unnecessary to make everything unconscious conscious. My experience told me that, Yes, the process was profoundly healing, and the healing happened for me through the creative process of Acting.

To summarize this chapter, I have explored the healing aspects of acting through writing and performing a dramatic piece, in order to see how I can extend this work to clients. I have first discussed appropriate role, giving examples of actors' and clients'

experiences, as well as discussing my choice of role for my own process. I've looked at criteria for knowing if a character is therapeutically right for a client, and then examined specific acting techniques, and how they can be adapted to character and text work. I have charted my experience by including selected journal excerpts, as well as summarizing the play.

Finally, I have discussed the results of my experience/experiment, what I have gleaned as a therapist, principally that the process was profoundly healing for me in many ways. It also made me realize that in terms of a therapeutic theatrical model, the healing happened predominantly within the creative process, rather than in the post-mortem analysis of it. This will certainly influence my theatrical model of dramatherapy.

## CONCLUSION

My purpose in this paper has been two-fold: a) to show that an organic way of acting is indeed healing, and that, adapted to dramatherapy, proven acting techniques can be viable therapeutic tools; and b) to explore the healing aspects of acting through creating and performing a dramatic piece, in order to see how this work could be incorporated in a beginning theatrical model.

For the purposes of this study, I tested my theories on myself by doing a solo piece. The long-term nature of this way of working prohibited me from researching these methods with a client group, though this is what I would anticipate doing in a future study.

My conclusion that truthful acting is indeed healing, and that organic acting methods can be highly therapeutic, was arrived at through my literature search, my past experience as an actor and acting teacher, and through working on my solo piece. In my literature review, I have cited over two dozen dramatherapists, psychologists, directors, acting teachers, professional and non-professional actors, all of whom have experienced the healing power of acting in their work, and in their lives.

For myself, having trained with gifted teachers in various organic methods, and worked for over twenty years as a professional actor, I have also experienced the therapeutic benefits of this way of working. Indeed it was my experience as a performer, and as an acting teacher, that inspired me to become a dramatherapist. Again and again in my classes with both professional and non-professional actors, I witnessed the healing effects of this work (i.e., through acting exercises which led to work on specific roles,

characters, and text work, students also worked through problems in their own lives).

Lastly, in this study, through writing and performing a dramatic piece, and charting the process from the perspective of dramatherapist/actor, as opposed to just actor, I could further clarify my theories. I found the entire process immensely healing. It confirmed for me that through working on a character I was strongly drawn to, and using the acting techniques I espouse, I could examine and clear some of my own issues.

In terms of my theatrical model, I was pleased to discover and re-experience the beauty of the intangible in both the creative and therapeutic processes, and to realize that even with a therapeutic intent, it is not always necessary to analyze everything one experiences, that true healing can come from the creative process itself, rather than in dissecting the experience afterwards.

### **Steps Towards a Theatrical Model**

I would like to reiterate that this is just the beginning stage of this model. I believe this work will evolve considerably through future work with different client groups. I also believe though, that within the given structure, each therapist and group must find their own way. As I have stated before, the beauty of an organic process, creatively or therapeutically, is that while it gives one the safe structure that encourages one to grow wings and fly, it ensures that no two flights are the same.

How does a therapeutic theatrical model differ from an acting class? Firstly, and most importantly, the intention is different. The intention in the former is to use theatre processes and acting techniques as a therapeutic means of working through personal

issues and problems, as opposed to using them to create great art.

I also feel that the relationship between dramatherapist and client is different than the one between acting teacher and actor. I have worked with some brilliant teachers/directors, and learnt a great deal, but there is a certain kind of discipline in a good acting class that I would not demand in a therapy group. In an acting class, 'Art' is the master and the goal. An exercise might be done repeatedly, a three hour class or rehearsal might stretch to four or five, if the work is going well. The work within a dramatherapy group should indeed be gentler. As a therapist, I would work to create a safe, contained space, have a contract, follow guidelines and time frames, and allow the clients to know that no matter what personal issues came up, this would be a safe environment to express themselves. A good acting teacher/director would hopefully do the same, but the goal being great art, a student's personal issues would not be explored or shared. To do so would be considered indulgent, and a student would likely be told that 'this is an acting class, not a therapy session', and advised to 'get some therapy', if necessary.

In my hypothetical model, the session format would naturally vary, depending on the population. The pace of the exercises, the level of intensity, whether one would even get to text work, or just stay with the improv exercises, would depend on the population and specific needs of the group. A group, or an individual might not be comfortable with every exercise, and this, of course, would be respected, but with any group, this would be a long-term therapeutic process and commitment - up to a year - meeting once or twice a week.



This way of working is collaborative. The clients would be nurtured and eased into the work, but nothing would be imposed on them. The exercises are designed not to inhibit, but to free, giving one a solid and safe foundation to work from, but I believe the therapist should take his lead from the client (i.e., respect the client's rhythm, and 'readiness' to try things).

A hypothetical session would start with the group coming together in a circle, and the therapist 'checking in' with each person to see how they had been since the last meeting. There would then be a Warm Up, which would include voice exercises, and some physical movement, to relax clients, and release tension. There might be a guided visualization, and/or Meisner's Word Game to start with. Then, over the months, the series of improvisational exercises would be slowly worked through. As clients would design their own improvs, with help from the dramatherapist if need be, situations could be chosen that a client wished to explore, the Verbal Obstacle exercise with one's 'boss', for example. Down the road, also in this Action portion of the session, monologues and scenes might be worked on.

In the Closure portion, I would have everyone rejoin the circle to process, discuss or share anything that anyone might wish to, though this would not be mandatory. I would likely close the session with a short meditation, to centre people emotionally, before leaving.

Later, when getting into script, or autobiographical performance work, from having done the series of improvs, the level of acting would definitely be higher. This would enhance the therapeutic benefits of performance (i.e., witnessed or shared truthful

work. as opposed to spurious acting, would strengthen the client's self-esteem, and self-acknowledgement).

From my own experience doing my solo piece, I also felt it extremely worthwhile keeping a journal, and I would likely suggest to clients so inclined, that they keep a journal throughout the months, writing down whatever they are feeling, ideas for improves, or whatever might come up for them throughout the process that they believe is important.

Finally, in thinking of the links between Art and Therapy, and ruminating on some of the larger questions Art asks: 'Why are we here?' and, 'What is our purpose, collectively, and individually?', I realize that all artists, and all good actors, strive for those perfect moments in their art where everything comes together, is synthesized in a sense. One feels totally alive, in the present, with an astonishing clarity, sense of well being, self-understanding, and sense of purpose. Indeed, it is these moments that keep artists creating, over and over again.

I believe that in therapy we strive for the same thing: to find ways of connecting to our higher selves and higher purpose, in order to make sense of our world and to heal or make whole what has broken apart, or unravelled within us.

There is no magic formula, creative or otherwise, that will instantly heal one's pain or difficulties, but I have both witnessed and experienced how an organic way of acting can help towards self-understanding and self-healing. I believe that as a therapeutic vehicle in dramatherapy, this work can also help one to connect to one's

higher, healthier self, clear painful issues, help one to develop self-love and belief in self, and enable one to take steps towards becoming whole.

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