



HEALING THROUGH ACTION

Healing through action. That's the bumper sticker you get if you're a drama therapist. The lexicon of the trade includes words like process, personal integration, and potential. Drama therapy is concerned with development of the whole person, physically, mentally, and emotionally, through the drama process. Whether clients are highly functioning, disabled, or in crisis, they work with drama therapists through creative enactments in a safe environment, experimenting with roles and generating possible solutions to problems.

As a Registered Drama Therapist, I work in schools, retirement communities, with international projects, and communication workshops. The teen theatre troupe I have directed since 1988 recently took on the mantle of private nonprofit and became Southern Oregon Impact Theatre. Our mission is to focus community attention on the strengths and assets young people need to successfully address pressing social issues through dramatic presentations and audience interaction. Our bumper sticker says, *imagine the possibilities*.

Each new troupe of Impact actors creates and performs scenes about issues most pressing to them. In our performances, actors often take suggestions on how to transform a particular scenario, sometimes even involving audience members in the transformation. Some sites ask our actors to do follow up workshops, bringing the issues presented in the performance alive in active learning. For example, if our performance has been about sexual harassment, the workshop will involve role-playing activities to recall what constitutes harassment followed by scene-building on topics such as "respect" and "valuing self and others."

Impact actors typically range in age from 14 through 19 and become involved for many of the same reasons that I became a drama therapist. On her application to join the troupe, one actor cited her reason for wanting to be an Impact actor: "I know that drama can help and I want to help." Troupe members usually perform with the troupe for two to four years.

The creative process within the troupe involves "set aside" days for retreats in addition to regularly scheduled rehearsals. Improvisation and timed writings are two methods we have for generating material for the scenes. Sometimes actors write their thoughts on a subject and I edit and combine ideas to produce a script. Recently, finding several former troupe members home for summer vacation, I hosted a "Creative Consultants" gathering. I offered writing prompts and facilitated a discussion on subjects including *accepting diversity, dealing with challenges, and holding on to hope*. The perspectives were well articulated and varied and everyone gave me permission to "gold mine" their ideas for Impact scripts. Generating fresh material is important to this work.

Mutual mentoring is what sprang to mind when our troupes began performing and conducting workshops in prisons and treatment centers. One project involved seven young women from our troupe and seven young women from inside a correctional facility who came together and formed a new troupe in a project called *Inside/ Out*. We met every week for a two-hour session of processing, writing, and rehearsing. Troupe members corresponded between rehearsals and talked freely about what was going on in their lives. The script we generated combined original writing and improvisation. The writing was self-revelatory, focusing on the inside/out metaphor. A writing prompt at our first gathering called for responses to, "Inside and outside: what do these words mean to you?" The writers called out to be trusted, known.

A young woman from the "outside" troupe wrote:

*On the outside the inside is deep
inside
And the outside of me might not
tell you
What the inside knows.*

And from inside the facility, a similar response:

If you see me inside, locked down

*and shut down
You won't see inside me at all.*

The mutual mentoring happened through shared strengths. The idea of “helping those girls in lockdown” quickly became a trivial notion, replaced by lessons learned and paradigms forever shifted. After the show, held inside the facility for selected members of the community and prison staff, we all had a chance to reflect on the prompt, “As I walk away from this....” From inside and outside the facility, there was agreement:

*As I walk away from this, I take with me
a new outlook on life A better understanding of
the women around me And a better
understanding of myself My heart and mind will
never for get the love and acceptance I felt from
these women.*

Impact actors also interact with clients in a residential treatment center for adolescent boys. Drama games and warm-ups lead to improvisation of a deeper nature. Impact troupe members, usually a few years older than the residents, are role models in this setting. They help direct the exercises and help the clients stay focused during role-play and other activities. They often say, after the challenges and victories, that it was in this venue they felt most needed. Even though our sessions are scheduled on a regular basis, “When are you coming back?” is always the question the clients ask at the end of each workshop. An eleven-year-old client took an Impact troupe member aside and thanked him for a particular kind of acceptance: “You guys treat us like we’re cool. I never felt cool before.”

The Impact actor responded, “Once you know you’re cool, you’ll never go back.”

We all smiled at the story, and we knew the client would indeed “go back” to feeling like an uncool loser. As he tried to discover appropriate boundaries and behaviors, a consistent rhythm of achievement would be a long time coming. And yet, he had experienced success. The troupe had made an impact by helping one boy see himself differently.

I base my approach to drama therapy on intention. It is different from other types of acting and theatre because our primary intention is service. When Albert Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge,” I think he recognized that developing imagination creates a powerful tool. We serve our audiences by helping them develop that tool. We can use imagination to see ourselves differently, to find new options and get unstuck from behaviors that cripple our mobility. Rehearsing new behaviors through role-play, for example, may help someone *choose* an option other than rage. Between what happens and our response to it, there is a moment of choice; in that moment we find our potential for growth and movement.

In schools and community events, Impact performs scenes and monologues based on the personal experiences of the members. One Impact actor commented, “Once I wrote a monologue about a recent very painful experience in my life. When I performed it for the troupe, I couldn’t get all the way through it; I had to leave the room. I sat in the bathroom and cried for fifteen minutes. The next time, I got through it. Then I started performing it for audiences. It hurt less after awhile and at some point in the season, I even figured out what I wanted to do about the whole thing.”

“It’s empowering,” one creative consultant wrote in a script she created for the troupe. “Sometimes we say, ‘I’d like to help, but I’m only one person.’ Just one person. One. One person plus one person plus one person equals a team, a troupe, a family... coming together to make a difference.”

The therapeutic use of drama means an intentional igniting of the creative flame. Once that flame is ignited, the world changes. There is a healing, through action, of old attitudes. “I can’t” is altered, making space for a wealth of possibilities.

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