

## **Combining Play Reading with Group Process to Enhance Professional Development\***

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“I regard the theater as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be human”. – Oscar Wilde

Theater and group therapy share a common bond. Both are collaborative endeavors designed to provide intimate, interactive small group experiences for the purpose of healing, growth and meaning making. The bearing witness by an empathic other is central to their success. I have been positively influenced by the power and genius of these kindred traditions. The theater formally introduced me to my psychic life. Group therapy gives my professional identity depth and purpose. I have incorporated many of their principles and practices into an educational project that first began as a flight of fancy. Since then it has developed into an avocation that nourishes my professional life and those of the members of Red Well Theater.

The Red Well Theater Group offers experiential learning for the therapist-as-actor through dramatic play readings and for the therapist-as-audience through a bearing witness experience and shared reflection. Our goals are to illuminate themes of recognition and wellbeing in and beyond the therapy group, to deepen the therapist's empathy for the challenge of being in a group and to provide a vitalizing experience in support of the therapist's self care.

After a few years of presenting play readings at group therapy conferences, the Red Well Theater Group was formally organized in 2008. The founding members are colleagues from Washington, D.C. who share a love of theater and a commitment to group therapy training. All have an affinity for empathy and improvisation as a natural outgrowth of their group therapy practices. A guest artist program invites young professionals and other colleagues to participate on a per project basis. Working with diverse, multi-generational acting ensembles has enhanced the range of our theater presentations and enriched our group process. Mentoring the next generation of group therapists has become a highly valued experience for the members and our guest artist colleagues.

### **Presentation Format**

My careers as a stage director and group therapist have been helpful in devising a performance format and rehearsal process that reflects the Group member's acting talents, educational goals and therapeutic sensibilities. The simplicity of a reading bypasses the need to memorize lines or to move about the stage. Performing 'in the round' mirrors the group therapy physical arrangement. These adjustments allow the

therapists-as-actors to become more deeply immersed in the here-and-now of dramatic, interpersonal exchange. Scripts are selected for their resonance with clinical and social issues encountered in our therapy practices. As the stage director with a clinical sensibility, I simultaneously approach the play as a drama, a process recording and a dream. This gives the ensemble greatest latitude in the process of interpreting the play and understanding its relevance to the therapeutic enterprise.

Art historian and educator Terry Barrett has been instructive in our efforts to develop a dialogical framework for the discussion segment. Mr. Barrett (1999) observes, “Works of art are mere things until we begin to carefully perceive and interpret them—then they become alive and enliven us as we reflect upon, wonder about, and respond to them. When we choose to interpret out loud to others who want to hear us, we become active participants in public life rather than passive observers, moving toward community and away from isolation”. Our post-performance discussion has evolved from a free associative exchange to a more intentional process that begins with a two-person ‘talk to your neighbor’ segment, followed by a brief intermission. We resume with a formal discussant response, and conclude with a facilitated audience conversation. This sequence emphasizes emotional safety while preparing everyone to participate openly in the communal dialogue.

### **Preparing our 2014 Open Session**

For nearly a decade the AGPA Annual Meeting has been a meaningful opportunity for us to develop our model. We have presented nine different plays. Our first presentation in 2006 featured the play ‘Art’ by Yasmina Reza. The play is about a

white painting and Lacanian desire. On our third outing in 2008 we presented *Off the Map* by Joan Ackermann, an allegory about the wounded healer in us all. Our plenary presentation of *Off the Map* at the 2010 Northern Ireland Group Psychotherapy Conference in Belfast was our first opportunity to experience the power of a play reverberating throughout an entire conference (Dluhy & Schulte, 2013).

This year (2014) at AGPA in Boston we presented *The Great God Pan*, by Amy Herzog. Unsettling and yet deeply compassionate, the play provides an intimate account of what is lost and won when a long hidden truth is revealed. The central character Jamie has a seemingly idyllic life in Brooklyn, NY—a beautiful girlfriend, a budding journalism career, and parents who live just far enough away. But when Jamie discovers he may have been the victim of a childhood sexual trauma, his life is thrown into a tailspin. *The Great God Pan* explores the influence of traumatic experience on memory processes, the impact of childhood sexual abuse on adult intimate relationships, the destabilizing effects of family secrets, and the healing power of truth seeking within a group context.

Preparing an ensemble of group therapists-as-actors to present a play reading of such potent dramatic material is a complex process. The interplay of artistic sensibilities, small group dynamics, trauma histories and performance anxieties called for a highly collaborative approach with special attention to the containing function. With this in mind, we assembled a group that included both regular members and guest artists, two of whom were participating for the first time. The leadership team included a play

director, consultant and discussant, with shared responsibility for direction, containment and emotional support.

A unique feature of the rehearsal process is the inevitability that the drama will get under our skin—and inside our hearts and minds and even our souls. We unconsciously start feeling, thinking and relating to each other in ways that resemble the characters and their torment. Having seen this process unfold many times in previous projects, I was concerned about the play's traumatogenic potential to overwhelm us. To help neutralize this possibility, I engaged musician and sound healer Tom Teasley to use his improvisational skills to facilitate emotional regulation within the acting ensemble and eventually the audience. His dual focus on theatricality and emotional wellbeing was transformative. Additionally, the leadership team was vigilant throughout to manage boundaries with sensitivity and clarity. We also devised an extended, two-phase approach to the rehearsal process to better insulate the members of the ensemble.

The initial phase featured a once-a-month study group format conducted for three months, whereby the actors had the opportunity to read the parts of different characters. This helped the actors develop a play-as-a-whole understanding and deepen their empathy for the vulnerabilities and strengths of all the characters. Each of these early rehearsals included a group process session. In January we shifted to a traditional theater approach of scene and character study, with the actors exploring their assigned character in weekly rehearsals. The last meeting before traveling to Boston was a dress rehearsal with an audience of friends and colleagues to bear witness and give feedback.

## **Our AGPA Presentation Experience**

The positive audience response to our presentation of *The Great God Pan* was gratifying on many levels. The actors were well prepared, confident and focused. The vibrant buzz from the 'talk to your neighbor' pairings was confirmation of the play's impact. I could feel the aliveness of the exchanges, without knowing what anyone was saying. The timing and content of the discussant segment, presented by Eleanor Counselman, effectively linked our shared theatrical experience to the group therapy enterprise. She opened her remarks with this quote from an article by Janice Gump, Ph.D. (2010). "Trauma leaves a void that can be filled only by the revisiting of it, whether through creative productions or through the presence of another: The film, poetry, art and the therapist make possible the registration of horror. To be mastered, the unspeakable feelings evoked by the trauma must find communicable form, and a structure that gives them coherence and meaning."

As with group therapy, our process of meaning making continued beyond the open session. The actors have since written blog postings sharing their experiences of preparing *The Great God Pan* for AGPA. These insightful accounts can be read at [www.redwelltheater.blogspot.com](http://www.redwelltheater.blogspot.com). From their work and their writings I have a fuller appreciation for the talent, clinical sensibilities and courage of the therapists-as-actors, Kavita Avula, Connor Dale, Barbara Keezell, Liz Marsh, Yavar Moghimi, Rosemary Segalla and Rob Williams. I am indebted to our consultant John Dluhy, musician Tom Teasley, discussant Eleanor Counselman and all the RWTG members for their attuned contributions and guidance. A leader finds the group he needs.

RWTG also presented *The Great God Pan* at the Division 39 Annual Meeting in New York City in April 2014. Our upcoming December 6, 2014 presentation at the ICP+P sponsored, Bruce Wine Memorial Conference will give us another opportunity to again encounter the power of the play and consider its relevant themes, for which we are grateful.

**\* This article is an updated version that originally appeared in the AGPA Group Circle Newsletter, Spring 2014.**

### **References**

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