

A Theatrical Rendering of Lack in a Trio

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This paper invites the reader into the world of Lacan and his analytic ideas most relevant to dynamic group therapy through a presentation of the stage play ‘*Art*’, by Yasmina Reza, as performed by the Red Well Theater Group². The presentation format features a dramatic reading followed by a moderated discussion with the audience, actors and director. The Group’s mission is to illustrate the principles of dynamic group therapy to audiences of practicing group therapists. Red Well Theater Group has performed ‘*Art*’ for local, regional and national group psychotherapy conferences including the AGPA 2002 Annual Meeting and the EGPS 2008 Fall Conference. A play-reading study group for therapists is also described as a forum for ongoing study of Lacanian perspectives relevant to dynamic group therapy.

Key words: Dynamic Group Therapy, ‘*Art*’, Lacan, Red Well Theater Group, Lack

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² I express gratitude to Red Well Theater Group members for their creative contributions, most especially John Dluhy for his rendition of Marc in repertory productions of ‘*Art*’ and his support. I am indebted to Macario Giraldo for his pioneering work in applying Lacanian perspectives to the analytic group and for his helpful comments to early versions of this paper.

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The painter reveals—renders perceptible—something we had not seen before.

(Fink, 2007, p.47)

INTRODUCTION

Lacan was intimately linked to art and theater throughout his career as a psychoanalyst. It was the Surrealist painters who first responded with enthusiasm to his thesis on the mirror stage of child development—long before the analytic world would take notice (Lacan, 2006; Lomas, 2001). His theatrical flair for teaching in a group seminar format cultivated a worldwide following of artists, intellectuals and psychoanalysts. Even the general public attended, and all considered his seminar a ‘hot ticket’. Lacan’s influence on aesthetics, notably visual art, literature and cinema, is rivaled only by the indelible mark left on his chosen field of psychoanalysis. A confounding man prone to both “authoritarian fiat and anti-authoritarian defiance” (Black & Mitchell, 1995, p. 194), Lacan’s enduring reputation ranges from ‘la-con artist’ to creative innovator to cultural icon. I imagine Lacan in his time was embraced like our modern day celebrity, only without the cameras—part Oprah, part Carl Sagan and part Jerry Lewis. Stage presence, genius and wit were natural to him.

Lacan’s life work focused on restoring the place of the unconscious to center stage of psychoanalytic theory and practice. He eventually went beyond Freud with innovations of his own that included a reformulation of the unconscious in linguistic terms and a radical transformation of the id-ego-superego triad into a vision of *imaginary*, *symbolic* and *real* dimensions of psychic reality (Fink, 1995).

Lacan’s charisma and personal style made the here-and-now immediacy of the seminar a natural group venue to communicate his ideas. More fundamentally, he trusted

speech acts rather than written words to generate the unconscious-to-unconscious communications he desired with audiences, as he did with patients. He viewed the ego as a symptom par excellence and vigorously opposed the American ego psychologists who, he felt, promoted a dream of autonomy, fulfillment and conscious control. Lacan was a philosopher of desire, not a rationalist. His overarching aim was to evoke the unconscious as the basis for knowing and not knowing. Not trying to be understood in a conventional sense, he was content to elude, obscure and provoke with the aim of disrupting predictable thought patterns in the pursuit of something more profound.

North American psychotherapists working in different analytic traditions but wanting an in-depth experience of Lacan will not find an easy or obvious path. Yet many of his central tenets are resonant with those of dynamic group therapy (Giraldo, 2009) and deserve thoughtful study, including the trans-personal and linguistic nature of the unconscious, the power of the speech act, the impossibility of desire's full satisfaction and the role of the imaginary, symbolic and real in binding the human psyche (Julien, 1994).

In this paper I invite the reader into the world of Lacan and those analytic ideas most relevant to dynamic group therapy through a presentation of the stage play '*Art*' (Reza, 1996), as performed by the Red Well Theater Group. I provide a clinically informed analysis of the written text and describe the mis-en-scene (production design elements) to illustrate my own particular Lacanian sensibility. The actor and audience experience and a play-reading study group format are also described as enlivening educational opportunities for therapists wanting to relate Lacanian perspectives to dynamic group therapy. I begin by introducing the core concepts of *dynamic interplay* as

the central organizing principle linking theater and group therapy and Lacan's three registers (or dimensions) of psychic reality, the *imaginary*, *symbolic* and *real*.

CORE CONCEPTS

Dynamic Interplay

The kinship between theater and dynamic group therapy is well established. Each enterprise relies on dynamic interplay (continuously unfolding, powerful, unpredictable, mutually influencing action and reaction) within a multi-person field to facilitate a combination of goals, including some measure of cathartic relief, subjective truth-seeking and mutual relatedness. Scene structure, ritual, role, spontaneity, improvisation, scripting and an interpretative perspective are shared features, though understood and applied through the particular lens of the respective discipline and its practitioners. (Anzieu, 1956; Diatkine, Leibovici, Soule, 1995; Hoffman, 1998; Moreno 1946-69; (Rubinfeld, 2001) Rutan & Stone, 2001; Stanislawski, 1961; Woodruff, 2008). The traditional western theater's creative process unfolds with playwright, director, actors and audience working collaboratively to bring a play to life (Fortier, 2002). The group therapist or psychodramatist works in his own unique therapeutic milieu to similarly dramatize the patient's subjective experience through both structured and spontaneous interpersonal exchange and through the unconscious communications of enactment and reflective thought. In *Self Experiences in Group* (pp. 91-92), Sigmund Katerud (1998) describes the group therapy process in expressly dramatic terms:

The therapeutic group... is the ambitions and ideals of a healing community set into action by a particular group analyst and a particular selected brand of patients... If the group analyst has learned his lesson well, he manages through

his directorship, group analytic dramaturgy and interpretations to set in motion healing forces embedded in the western intellectual tradition of self-emancipation. He opens a healing text and lets the text play with himself and the group members. Imbedded are stories about what is true and false, about lies and honesty, frankness and hypocrisy, about what is morally right and wrong, about oppression, seduction and evilness, about human rights, belonging and trust, and authentic encounters in contemporary societies... all group analysts know that telling the story in a group is also an enactment which makes the story come alive in the here and now.

Imaginary, Symbolic and Real Registers of Psychic Reality

The decades-long conceptual evolution of Lacan's imaginary, symbolic and real registers of psychic experience led him to eventually conceptualize their interrelatedness. Lacan began his career with a primary focus on the register of the *imaginary*, the self-organizing, though illusory, mirrored-through-the-eyes-of-the-other pre-Oedipal experience. He subsequently and emphatically shifted emphasis to the *symbolic* realm of language and social law, believing the true psychoanalytic work of signification resided in this domain. Eventually his interest came upon the *real*, that which is left over, the impossible-to-symbolize, the ineffable and the traumatic. Lacan's systematic exploration of each register and their mutually influencing relationship to each other led him to conceive of their interrelatedness as the force binding the psyche. Lacan appropriated the metaphor of the Borromean Knot, with its three intertwined rings linked together only so long as each ring remained itself unbroken, to visually capture this binding quality. Lacan eventually approached the three registers as mutually influenced and hierarchically equal

to one another, a formulation suggestive of their own dynamic interplay (Fink, 2007, pp. 262-3).

THE GENESIS OF *'ART'*

'Art' is about three men friends who together face “apocalypse”—revelatory knowledge with the power to destroy. Written in French by Yasmina Reza and translated to English by Christopher Hampton, *'Art'* is set in Paris in the late 20th century, near the zenith of Lacan’s influence on psychoanalysis and French culture. Reza describes the genesis of her script idea as coming from a real-life experience of her own friend buying a modern white-on-white work of art—and she openly laughing at it in response. Although her friend reportedly did not take offense, Reza made the imaginative leap that such a purchase could cause quite a row for less enlightened souls—specifically men—and thus *'Art'* was conceived (Gale, 2005).

The play tells an elegantly simple story of Marc, Serge and Yvan—a trio of men who have been friends for fifteen years. Serge has recently bought a much-coveted, all-white painting, by an iconic French artist, Antrios, for a lot of money. His friend Marc is distraught and hurt, believing the painter to be a con artist and Serge to have callously abandoned their friendship for a new group of elites and the hollow prestige of being viewed as a “collector”. Marc is unwilling to reveal his pain of no longer being an object of Serge’s desire, choosing instead to criticize Serge as simply wrong, alienating him further. Their mutual friend Yvan is getting married in two weeks. Desperate not to lose the only two friends he has in the world, Yvan tries mightily to keep the peace by taking both sides in their disagreement at the same time, with predictably disastrous results. His

self-effacing manner rendered totally ineffective, he tries to resolve their bitter impasse by sharing an interpretation made by his off-stage analyst Dr. Finklezohn (p.33):

If I'm who I am because I'm who I am and you're who you are because you're who you are, then I'm who I am and you're who you are. If on the other hand, I'm who I am because you're who you are and if you're who you are because I'm who I am, then I'm not who I am and you're not who you are...

I see Lacan's penchant for the conundrum to contain and express paradoxical ideas playfully parodied in Finklezohn's longwinded, oracular interpretation about the inescapable role of the other in human subjectivity. Translated to contemporary relational language, Finklezohn's riddle underscores the universal human desire and "struggle to establish, maintain and protect intimate bonds with others and to escape the pains and dangers of those bonds—the sense of vulnerability, the threat of disappointment, engulfment, exploitation and loss" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 29). As with an Escher drawing, I view Finklezohn's attempt to penetrate and disrupt the self-protective, delusional belief that a person can be an island unto himself, free of the influence of others in becoming and being "who you are" from both a Lacanian and relational angle. Outside the consulting room, however, Finklezohn's interpretation brings only derision from Marc, who mocks Yvan, "How much do you pay this man?" Serge piles on, "Can we have a copy? It's sure to come in handy." Yvan protests, "You're wrong. It's very profound." It's clear this trio will need more than a clever interpretation, penetrating as it may be, to come face-to-face with their apocalyptic truth.

THE PLAYWRIGHT AS OTHER

Just as patients in a therapy group must contend with the enduring influence of archaic others on the life-long process of becoming and being their most authentic selves, actors must become reconciled with an archaic playwright/other who exerts a similar authority and influence on their most intimate thoughts, feelings, movement and speech—indeed, their very existence. Playwrights, like long-lost mothers, can make life a joy or misery for their actor progeny and the director/therapist who works with them. Regarding her own approach to writing for actors, Reza describes herself as having a naturally ‘laconic’ writing style, one well suited to an actor’s appropriately grandiose ambitions: “Most writers don’t know that actors are never better than in the pauses...they give the actors too many words...In a play, words are but parentheses to the silences. They are useful for the actors, but only that; they aren’t the whole story” (Patch, 2000, p. 2). She intuitively recognizes that the text and the stage must work together to make breathing room for the actors so as to ‘read between the lines’ as they search for the play’s essence. This notion is resonant with Lacan’s appreciation of the indeterminate, the surprising and the unexplainable in psychoanalytic discourse. Reza’s sensitivity to the psychic space actors need to enliven their speech acts parenthetically helps a director confirm or modify his unconscious impressions of the live stage action, just as group members’ moment-to-moment speech acts provides the analyst with ongoing clinical data about the nature of the group.

LAC/AN/TRIOS

As a stage director I develop working hypotheses about the dramatic action of the play by using the written script itself and its unconscious impact on me as a continual source of inspiration, even as it is modified by the actor’s live contribution. Listening to a

play script from a Lacanian perspective is to value “the way in which it (the text) is delivered” and to note, “what does not fit, does not make sense, or seems to make too much sense and therefore seems problematic” (Fink, 2007, p.13). This is also instrumental in the process of creating fictional back-stories of the characters based on the text’s specific clues, a standard depth-seeking exercise in the theater. One of the earliest by-products of my effort at a Lacanian-styled listening process was my association *Lac/an/trios*, a conflation of Lacan, the psychoanalyst and Antrios, the fictional painter in ‘*Art*’. As both men are controversial, legendary French artists in their respective fields with the concept of lack central to their genius, I began to speculate about the possible allegorical intentions of the playwright. Reza wrote ‘*Art*’. Was she thinking ‘*Analysis*’? *Lac/an/trios* eventually led me associatively to the phonetically resonant phrase, *lack in a trio*. My directorial interpretation of ‘*Art*’ emanates from this phrase: lack in a trio.

A LACANIAN ANALYSIS

My fully elaborated hypothesis of why the painting and its purchase are so engaging is premised on my imagining the dynamic interplay of three basic Lacanian ideas. First, that a universal state of psychological lack—engendered by the loss of the original love object, specifically mother or her equivalent—generates continuous unconscious desire across the life cycle for her/its rediscovery and restoration (Giraldo, 2009, p. 1). Secondly, this condition of lack cannot be avoided, nor is it possible to ever fully satisfy the unconscious desire it generates in us. “We are not immortal, our days being numbered; we do not know when we will die; we cannot do all things, become proficient in all areas, or master all fields; and there are limits to our knowledge” (Fink

2007, p. 91). And thirdly, the human subject is at the mercy of a pre-existing, culturally-based language system that inducts us into a predetermined place in the culture. This system continuously influences how we live and experience life in ways that are substantially beyond our control and awareness.

Together these Lacanian tenets provide the broader foundation for my conceptualizing of the play's dramatic action. Distilled, *'Art'* is about discovering and speaking the very particular, individual nature of one's unconscious desires and making an informed decision to live with the consequences in a responsible manner. To love, or not, in the face of this apocalyptic knowledge is the ethical decision facing Marc, Serge and Yvan (Lacan, 1997).

The next step as director is to consider this understanding in light of the scene-by-scene, beat-by-beat, moment-to-moment immediacy of the unfolding on-stage action. What follows is a condensed version of this process. I have strategically divided the play into three acts, inspired by the theater's classic Oedipal formulation: boy gets girl; boy loses girl; boy gets girl. (Serge is the "boy" and the painting is his "girl".)

Act I: Appraising the Painting

Marc: If you screw up your eyes...

Serge: Can you see the lines?

Yvan: It has something. It's not, nothing.

Storyline. The play starts with a series of brief scenes that feature one or two characters at a time. Marc, an aeronautical engineer, married to Paula and suffering an unspecified illness for which he takes medication, begins alone on stage. He informs the audience that his friend Serge, a divorced dermatologist

who has children who live with their mother, has bought a white painting, five feet by four. Marc says, “If you screw up your eyes you can make out a few white diagonal lines”. Marc then visits Serge and together they appraise the painting. Serge whispers, “Can you see the lines?” Serge clearly wants Marc to be impressed, but Marc declares the painting to be “shit”, offending Serge who shares with the audience how much he hated Marc’s know-it-all laugh. Marc admits to the audience that this crisis is a “complete mystery” to him, filling him with “indefinable unease”. Marc then visits Yvan, a hapless stationery salesman, in hopes of finding agreement that Serge is crazy. Yvan does not understand the “seriousness of this” and believes that if the painting makes Serge “happy” and “doesn’t hurt anyone”, what’s the harm? Marc and Yvan disagree whether a “system” is operating in the logic of the painting. Yvan declares he can make Serge laugh and thereby magically restore group harmony. Yvan returns triumphant only to have Marc discredit the elicited laugh by pointing out they were “not laughing for the same reasons”. At an impasse, Marc resolves to be “nicer”. Serge declares he “does not care”. Yvan tries to appear “happy”.

Analysis. The disruption of the relative harmony that has existed between Marc and Serge for nearly fifteen years is immediately revealed upon the raising of the curtain. Their world is that of the cozy imaginary—serial dual relationships kaleidoscopically moving from moment-to-moment based on the illusion of ‘you’re my one and only’. Marc had long been the beneficiary of Serge’s admiring eyes, a desire now satisfied by a new object, the painting, and by extension, Antrios. Neither Serge nor Marc can bear to speak directly of the painful new circumstances without a guarantee of approval and

validation of their feelings. They seek out exchanges with pre-oedipal mothers who will be dependably receptive while rejecting ones are avoided. The characters talk candidly only to the audience and Yvan in an effort to find yet again that blissful state of embrace in the eyes of the (m)other. Yvan, a man-child longing for a loving parental couple, is perfectly cast as selfless peacemaker, though he undermines his prospects of ever becoming an intentional being in pursuit of his own separate desires in the process. Reza provokes disharmony by introducing “a new family” of artist friends to coddle Serge, ushering in an aggressive phase of competition and conflict with Marc. One of Lacan’s creative innovations was to elaborate a fourth angle of the triangular Oedipal drama. Serge’s painting serves to ‘square’ the situation by revealing the existence of independent desires of mother for someone/thing other than the baby. In Lacan’s updated Oedipal drama, father’s intrusion (Antrios) is actually a ruse, though a necessary one in the developmental arc of the child’s separation and individuation process. The deeper truth is that mother (Serge) desires many things other than baby (Marc), rendering the bliss of timeless merger impossible. Father symbolizes that stark reality, and thus plays a pivotal role to make sure the baby moves out of mother’s exclusive orbit. But the baby does so based on a fiction that father is so powerful and must be obeyed. It is too traumatizing to think that mother herself will not exclusively desire the baby for eternity. Marc is shocked that Serge actually loves that damn painting more than him! How can that be possible?

Reza structures the early scenes of ‘*Art*’ to be of varying, fairly brief, length and later scenes of increasing length, in both cases to create surprise. These basic playwriting techniques are employed for much the same reason Lacan devised the variable length

analytic session, namely to keep the patient/audience guessing, hoping to catch the unconscious off guard and make penetrating contact with it (Fink, 2007, pp. 47-49).

Marc's ominous "if you screw up your eyes..." foreshadows the bloody Oedipal drama about to unfold. It also signals to the audience that a bi-focal perspective, foreground and background, surface and depth, will be needed to make full sense of the dramatic complications. The fate of the men's friendship will be wrenchingly revealed as Serge vigorously pursues his independence and Marc fights mightily to thwart him. The audience does not know it yet, but Marc signifies another imposing "mark" that will literally draw out apocalyptic truth at play's end. With Serge's paradoxical encouragement, Marc will use Yvan's blue marking pen to "fuck" with the painting, triggering their moment of truth. In his very first spoken lines of the play, Yvan had revealed that his pen (penis) is an "infuriating" object he always "misplaces", but that he also admires for its "very special felt tip". It "writes on anything" and yet is, in the end, "washable" (impotent). Marc's demand for love from Serge, who refuses, will lead to raping/castrating/impotent violence. Reza is a master at depicting funny and tragic in the same horrifying moment.

ACT II: Feeling the Pain-ting

Serge: We don't give a fuck about you!

Marc: There are no colors!

Yvan: Cry? You're telling me to cry!

Storyline. Fight/flight inspired conflict erupts in the second series of scenes when all three characters come together finally to meet face-to-face. Marc fails at being "nice". Serge fails at "not caring." Yvan fails at being "happy".

Prior events that have fueled the smoldering animosities and fears are finally revealed. Marc admits he was hurt by Serge's attack for his reaction to the word "deconstruction" in a seemingly forgotten argument. Serge had felt trivialized by Marc's dismissive comments. Yvan hijacks their soul-searching by entering late with a "crisis, insoluble problem"—a mother who cannot be satisfied and a like-minded fiancée who demands he still find a way and fast! Marc insults Yvan, compelling him to leave abruptly. Serge insults Marc's wife in a way that demands retribution. A cycle of escalating acrimony continues with Yvan's "penitential" return and crescendos when physical violence erupts between Marc and Serge. Yvan is caught yet again in the middle, receiving Marc's fist straight to his ear. Eventually, Marc admits he longs for the days when he was revered by Serge, stating, "I loved how you saw me." Yvan admits his profound loneliness underlying an accommodating nature: "I just want to be your friend, Yvan, the joker". Serge admits he was completely unaware of how much Marc loves him: "But I want to hear you say it". Marc also concedes, "I have no idea what binds me..." On an impulse, Serge presents Marc with Yvan's blue marking pen and an open challenge. Marc draws a diagonal line onto the painting and then sketches a downhill stick-figure skier onto the line. The trio inexplicably then goes to dinner.

Analysis. Though squarely in the imaginary realm, the play's action has the characters putting thoughts and feelings into words with their competitive, aggressive and destructive impulses fully on display. This creates a sense of inevitability—compelling momentum in the direction of the symbolic and eventually the real. As director, the emotionally realized acting moments of rehearsal have impacted my understanding. My

return to the written text for in-depth study following rehearsal, like a group therapist making use of the process recording of a group session, provided me with another angle to my thinking. I noticed if I shifted the syllable division in the word painting by one letter, it became ‘pain-ting’. This new division created for me another neologism that reminded me associatively of *das Ding* (the Thing), a German word Freud and Lacan used to refer to the lost love object (Lacan, 2006, pp. 656-657). The empty space left behind is the only ‘thing’ left to mark its prior existence. My associative transformation of the word painting into ‘pain-ting’, then ‘pain-thing’, activated new interpretive possibilities for understanding the character’s motivations and subjective experience. As Yvan said, the painting “...has something. It’s not nothing”. This elusiveness speaks to the gap between memory and perception of something experienced long ago—though lost, not forgotten.

Serge, a skin doctor, describes his painting as “not white”, because, he says, it has shades of grey, with a faint brown coloring, even a little red and yellow in it. Serge carries on in ever-increasing excitement that being with the painting at different times of the day, that, viewed from different angles, under ever changing patterns of natural light, it creates a distinctive resonance every time. This hyper-attuned sensitivity to its subtleties evoked a fantasy in me of a baby at the breast: the white of the milk oozing out over the brown nipple faintly showing under the surge of milk, dribbling down diagonally, with myriad subtle shadows created by the rounded breast’s attachment to mother’s body, with red and yellow veins faintly visible beneath the skin’s surface. Seen differently over the course of the day, depending on the natural light that accompanies a particular feeding hour, suggests a baby’s nursing schedule, with each occasion providing

its ever shifting, subtle delights. Serge is poetic in his voracious fervor, thrilled at having acquired the biggest trophy breast on the art market to relieve his archaic pain-thing. I interpret his “I don’t care” defensive rejection of criticism as a likely patterned response to early frustrations with maternal provision.

Yvan’s ‘pain-thing’ is being from a divorced family full of hate. His mother’s huge “heart of stone” is replicated by Marc’s alternating attitude of indulgence and contempt. Yvan’s father left the family rather than stand up to his mother, too perfectly replicated by Serge abandoning his friendship with Marc and not caring who is caught in the cross fire. Yvan must fend for himself, as always; his pain is never having two parents in the same room loving him and each other, at the same time. His enactments are a heroic effort to reconcile Serge and Marc, though seemingly to be met with failure yet again. Being hit in the ear is a poignant concretization of all the painful things he has heard from his mother’s mouth.

The nature of Marc’s ‘pain-thing’ is less clear. He obviously is mourning the loss of being the “special” one (the phallus, to use Lacan’s term) that could satisfy Serge’s desire for an admiring mentor/other. But something else seems to be at play. Marc struggles to find words for his “indefinable unease”. He declined an alcoholic beverage at one point during the play. His taking medication generates only frustration and he curiously identifies with the early 20th century French philosopher and poet, Paul Valéry. A complicated and mysterious man himself, Valéry went twenty years without publishing a poem before composing one of the greatest French masterpieces of the 20th century, entitled *La Jeune Parque*, translated *The Young Fate*. My curiosity activated, I associated to Serge’s dialogue about Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome and his attack on Paula, Marc’s wife,

occasioned by her description of a homeopathic cure for the ailment at a dinner party. The references have come to have deeper, clarifying meaning in my understanding of Marc. This emerged slowly—organically—out my experience of watching the same actor in the role over many performances. I have come to believe that Marc is holding back an “unsayable” truth (Rogers, 2006). I researched vascular Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome and learned it is an obscure, unpredictable and sometimes fatal disease, characterized by connective tissue deficiencies that can result in spontaneous ruptures of arteries and soft tissue organs (Bonnett-Rampersaud, 2009). While recognizing Reza’s intentions may only have been metaphorical, I speculate that Marc actually suffers from this disease, cannot bear to speak of it, and is burdened with the fear of exploding, both emotionally and physically. His ambivalence about being “nicer” and his outrage at Serge’s mockery of his wife make new sense when viewed from this angle.

Without this unspoken dimension of Marc’s back-story, *Art* risks drifting into sit-com predictability in my estimation. Many theater critics have derided the play as a lightweight though hilarious script, arguing its genius is located in its actability (Brantley, 1998). But the best playwrights are, in their containing function, like attuned therapists. They do not tell everything, lest the truth intrude into the breathing room of the creative process. Marc’s true situation may be one of Reza’s thoughtfully contained secrets.

ACT III: Loving the Pain...

Serge: Was it right to start with a lie? A lie!

Yvan: I cry all the time, it’s not normal for someone my age.

Marc: It represents a man who moves across a space, then...

Storyline. Recognizing they have destroyed their relationship “in word and deed”, Marc and Serge work together to restore the painting to its original appearance as a first step in a new beginning. Yvan expresses concern and curiosity about why he cries all the time, as he did upon hearing the phrase “trial period” used to describe Marc and Serge’s new conditional relationship status. Serge admits he lied when he told Marc he was unaware that the marking pen was washable, lest his grand gesture look insincere. Marc faces the painting with his eyes fully screwed up and describes what he now sees clearly “between the lines.”

Analysis. The play has now moved more fully into the symbolic realm, and is within a glimpse of the real, as each character reveals his deeper terrors and most personal pain without pretense. Marc conveys his own version of “deconstruction”, first by destroying the painting with a single, diagonal line, and then by constructing a playful self-image of a skier headed down the slope and blithely off the canvas. Accomplished with a curious mix of cold-blooded determination, graceful humor and a dash of mystery, it leaves everyone speechless. Not everything can be symbolized in language.

In Yvan’s case, he has either achieved the redemption of a “trial period” with his friends that he never had with his divorcing parents, or he has positioned himself to face one more enactment from his traumatic childhood if things fall apart. We do know that Yvan no longer expects “happy” to be attainable without a fully embraced emotionality and a non-rational, desiring commitment to love with an open heart.

Serge comes to realize his “shit” actually smells. His private acknowledgement to the audience that lying allowed him to escape his shame is a poignant reminder that analytic work for this obsessive character is an ongoing process. He finally asks a

beneath-the surface-question, “Why does my relationship with Marc have to be so complicated?” It’s delivered almost as a joke looking for a punch line, but none comes. That is Serge’s new lack that he must now contend with.

The characters see themselves and each other more as they really are, full of humbling lack. Yet their desire to love and be loved with mutual recognition has newly enlivened potential. The audience has witnessed their imperfect struggle to overcome lack, know their desire and strive to love, with deeper appreciation of what they are and are not. Finkelzohn “was right all along”, Yvan declares at play’s end. But the interpretation was not enough. A here-and-now group experience that goes beyond insight was needed just as members of a therapy group ultimately heal and grow through a combination of enactments, reflective thought, and new emotional connections.

The final moments of *Art* feature a soliloquy by Marc as he looks at a painting that he now realizes gazes back at him just as intently. In a poetic acknowledgment of his own too-young fate, Marc courageously gives symbolic language to the imaginary dimensions of his friend’s painting, thereby confirming his bonds of love while glimpsing the terrifying real of his eventual non-existence.

Under the white clouds, snow is falling.

You can’t see the white clouds or the snow—
or the cold, or the white glow of the earth.

A solitary man glides downhill on his skis.

The snow is falling.

It falls until the man disappears back into the landscape.

My friend Serge—who’s one of my oldest friends—has bought a painting.

It's a canvas about five feet by four.

It represents a man who moves across a space then disappears.

RED WELL THEATER GROUP

I founded the Red Well Theater Group with a group of Washington, D.C. psychotherapists who share a love of theater and an understanding of small and large group processes. We approach theater and group therapy as healing arts, similar in their capacity to illuminate the complexities of human relationships and the universal need for mutual recognition. Our presentation format features a dramatic reading of a stage play followed by a moderated discussion with the audience and the actors and director. Our Group's mission is to illustrate the principles of dynamic group therapy and its healing potential to audiences of practicing group therapists and to provide a forum for "reflecting, wondering and responding" (Barrett, 2006). We've performed 'Art' many times for local, regional and national group psychotherapy conferences including the American Group Psychotherapy Association 2002 Annual Meeting and the Eastern Group Psychotherapy Society 2008 Fall Conference.

Mise-en-scène

Just as a group therapy space is specifically designed for the unique therapeutic enterprise that unfolds, the *mise-en-scène* (production design elements) of our presentations are carefully considered for optimal audience impact. Elements of J.L. Moreno's therapeutic theater are recognizable in our presentation model, notably the use of in-the-round staging and the structure of warm-up, action and debriefing segments. Notable exceptions are the use of scripted material and the lack of actor movement or active audience involvement in what would be the action phase (Moreno, 1973).

Staging. The therapy group set-up is simple. A circle of chairs and a closed door do just fine. We replicate this simplicity with the actors located in the middle of the room, in a triangular position to one another, each getting a music stand, a script in a binder, and a single prop of symbolic importance. Serge has his painting (a white eraser board on a tripod), Yvan his marking pen and Marc his bottle of medication. The audience is seated in concentric circles around them. This preempts the proscenium's illusion that a single, unitary, arm's-length view of life is ever possible. It also absolves the actors from the requirement of playing directly to the audience as demanded by the proscenium. The actors remain intent on the immediacy of the moment, allowing every person in the space—actors and audience—a unique vantage point that will give “color and form” to their subjective experience.

Music. The most ineffable of staging elements is live music. We engage a cello player to provide an overture and interludes between scenes, and underscoring for Marc's final soliloquy. The cello was chosen for its ambiguity—not quite a happy violin and not quite a morose bass. Musical themes composed for each character are performed in a jazz-inspired improvisational style, creating a sound that is unpredictable, evocative and yet containing. The person of the cellist, with his responsiveness to the emotional tenor of the immediate moment, becomes a musical extension of the character's inner lives and spoken discourse. From my Lacanian sensibility, the cellist metaphorically underscores or ‘punctuates’ (Lacan, 2006, p. 314) the spoken text with an amplification of tone, rhythm, notation and volume, giving resonant depth to the lived moment.

Program Cover. Just as a group therapist thoughtfully designs the group consulting room with art and furnishings for the purpose of unconscious evocation and

communication, I designed the ‘*Art*’ program and selected its cover image for optimum impact on the audience member. I researched the original program covers of the French and American professional productions, and discovered contrasting images that almost comically reflect the irreconcilable philosophies that underlie Lacanian psychoanalysis and ego psychology. The French program featured three vertical rips on an unevenly graying canvas, grimly suggestive of Lacan’s real. The American program displays the title ‘*Art*’ on a brilliant white background, each letter a different primary color—red, green and yellow—suggesting enduring interpersonal harmony in Andy Warhol-like fashion.

Our Red Well program cover incorporates aspects of both sensibilities with a painting of three multi-colored faces in a primitive mask motif (Figure 1). The original work of art is an oil-on-the-backside-of-glass rendering, a quirky blend of primitive and contemporary features and techniques. Entitled *Friends*, the painting was inspired by a near-death experience of the artist who had been stabbed multiple times in an anonymous sexual encounter gone awry. He painted the picture as a tribute to the friends who saw him through a very long recovery. The artist’s repetitive staccato broad-brush stroke technique creates a vague impression of stabbing at the canvas’ surface, a subtlety that does not quite consciously register but becomes compelling for those knowing the back-story. In Lacanian fashion our cover image gazes at the viewer with unconscious-activating intentionality.

THEATER AS THERAPIST EDUCATION

The Acting Experience

Group therapists naturally bring basic acting skills of emotional recall, empathy and here-and-now immediacy to the task of play reading (Stanislavski, 1936; Hagen, 1973). They are more accustomed, however, to the director/group therapist position with its role demands of affect containment, reflective thought and facilitation. An important process in making a transition to the demands of the stage is for the therapist/actor to drop the therapeutic mandate, and ‘let it rip’. It is the antithesis of the therapist’s role to act out the narcissistic hurt of a rejected mentor, the self-absorbed preoccupation of a celebrity wannabe, or the love-me-at-all-costs vulnerability of a lost soul, as required by the roles of Marc, Serge and Yvan, respectively. I tell the actors, “You’re acting for acting’s sake. You cannot hurt the script. It is not possible. Let. It. Rip.” This is a process that does not happen with a single entreaty. The small group dynamics of the acting ensemble and eventual performance in front of an audience bring real emotional risks for exposure and shame, especially if one is reading a character that does “not-me” things. The eventual experience of audience appreciation will be a powerful therapeutic factor in releasing the amateur actor’s inhibitions, but the process starts with the director/actor relationship. I make one more entreaty to the actor: “Let it R.I.P.” Rest in peace. This word play is a paradoxical effort to prevent overzealousness from disrupting the complex process of building a character. This *let it rip/R.I.P.* dialectic promotes breathing room for the actor, akin to the “plunging in/reflective feedback loop” of the therapy group process (Yalom, 2005).

Cast members cultivate a unique group culture that requires a well-calibrated combination of talent, intelligence, courage, perseverance and collegiality. Reflective discourse conducted before, during and after each rehearsal is a vital part of the group

process and may include dream sharing, associations and fantasies. The discussions often take on the flavor of group therapeutic discourse.

Acting also provides a unique opportunity to grapple with Lacan's notion of the human subject as a de-centered being (Fink, 1995). A theatrically de-centered being is temporally created when an actor assumes a character with a pre-determined fate and assigned speech that is not his or her own. The actor is then catapulted into the world of a play made up by some godlike force that generates particular desires in each de-centered person/actor/character. The me/not-me experience is invaluable in grappling with some of Lacan's most complex theorizing about the human subject. The therapist/actor in role is also sensitized to wide-ranging self-states and dynamic processes that group therapy members routinely face, ranging from emptiness, vulnerability, shame and rage to liberated desire, empathy, assertiveness and forgiveness (Grossmark, 2007). Assuming roles that stimulate wide-ranging subjective experience provides the therapist/actor with opportunities for empathy, both painful and exhilarating, which generate a kind of theatrical *jouissance*.

The Audience Experience

When actors in the commercial theater perform for an audience, the contract is simple: "You can be my one and only desire, if only for the evening. But you'd better be good!" The person-as-actor-in-character works to fill up the audience's lack, and the audience will return the favor with laughter, tears and applause—mutual influence and recognition par excellence. Disenchantment with the commercial theater's "deadening" covenant with the audience inspired Moreno (1971, pp. 31-85) to develop the expressive psychodrama model that emphasizes spontaneity, a dissolving of the boundary between

actor and audience and a replacement of psychoanalytic interpretation with collective reflection. The French tradition of psychoanalytic psychodrama (Diatkine, Leibovici, Soule, 1995) retains the centrality of transference and interpretation, and both traditions flourish today as mainstream therapeutic models of group treatment in many parts of the world (Gershoni, 2003).

The Red Well Theater Group model is a hybrid of both legitimate theater and the psychodrama tradition. Red Well aspires to a restorative experience that can be both entertaining and educational for the group therapist audience. By combining high-quality commercial scripts resonant of group themes with a post-performance discussion between the audience, actors and director, a unique large-group experience is created. A conversation with an audience is a singular honor and pleasure for the creative team and a meaningful opportunity for an audience of therapists to share their associations, fantasies and subjective experience. This communal reflecting follows closely the tradition of the French *Le Théâtre du Soleil* that brings cast and audience together to actually dine and converse after every performance (Cohen, 2009). I recognize a debt of gratitude to psychodrama's pioneers for their creative use of theater as a primary group therapeutic modality and to humanistic innovators in the professional theater—rich traditions from which the Red Well Theater Group has learned and borrowed.

Post-Performance Discussion

Works of art are mere things until we begin to carefully perceive and interpret them... When we choose to interpret out loud with others who want to hear us, we become active participants in public life rather than passive observers, moving toward community and away from isolation (Barrett, 2007, p. xv).

A moderator prepares our audiences by explaining in advance the discussion format and offering clinically informed perspectives to consider when listening to the performance. This might include a suggestion that the play be viewed as a group therapy enterprise and the director its therapist equivalent, and from a particular theoretical tradition, i.e. Lacanian psychoanalysis. A specific framing of group themes, relational configurations or existential issues might also be offered. The advance knowledge that everyone is invited to contribute to the creative process through post-performance dialogue has an impact on the audience's anticipation and involvement in bearing witness and giving voice to their experience.

Play-reading Study Group Format

Red Well Theater Group members meet monthly to read plays as a complement to their performing duties and to further their own professional development. A play-reading study group gives members a more protected me/not-me acting experience, absent the pressures of performing for an audience. Fellow members bear witness in an audience's stead, thereby working in a more classic psychodrama tradition of assuming dual roles of actor and audience. The ongoing study group allows for a continuing process of developing a therapist/actor's sensitivity to their group member's subjective experience of working in the here-and-now. It also provides the freedom to switch roles, stop the action at will, re-read the play multiple times for deeper understanding and apply a range of theoretical perspectives to the motivations of the characters and the play's dramatic action. The play-reading study group is my idea of a modern day Lacan seminar.

CONCLUSION

In her play *'Art'*, Yasmina Reza has invented an “evening of the white painting” to reveal apocalyptic truth. I have used her creation to introduce the world of Lacan and his analytic ideas most relevant to dynamic group therapy. I have described my own particular Lacanian sensibility through a directorial interpretation of *'Art'*, as performed by the Red Well Theater Group and amplified by post-performance audience discussion. That sensibility includes using the non-linear concept of dynamic interplay to understand unfolding creative and group processes, finding word plays, puns and metaphors embedded in the text as expressions of unconscious communication, and taking a “let it rip/R.I.P.” dialectical attitude when working with therapists as actors. It is my hope that my portrayal of the actor and audience experience, and the description of our Red Well play-reading study group, will inspire readers to pursue their own path for in-depth study of Lacanian perspectives applied to dynamic group therapy.

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