

Transformational THEATRE

Healing Through Drama and Sound Therapy

Submitted by Saphira Linden, Artistic Director



Omega Theater from L to R: Nat Warren-White, Saphira Linden, Sarah Benson, Susan Niten Baum, Paul Temple

A few years ago I read an article in the morning paper about a violent act: a teenager killed another teenager in a high-school classroom. This happened in a fairly middle-class or affluent community south of Boston. It pained me deeply, and outraged me. That night I went to my Transformational Theater class filled with the rage and terror of that violent incident. I am the mother of a little boy too—he could have been him—a little middle class kid.

That night I created a theater performance about the story and my intense feelings; my frustrations of raising a child in a society where violent behavior is glorified in the movies from cartoons to toy guns. My piece even included the humor of being a parent who never wanted to give her little boy a toy gun. When I was a kid, the myth was cowboys and Indians on TV, but there was never the possibility on a cowboy or Indian who going to shoot me dead at McDonald's. Now that I have a child, the real violence is what I think about as a parent, because it happens. In the class, I was able to take this story and express my rage, and feel the full effects of it. It was very empowering; the night I performed this piece I knew I had really touched people. It was very healing. I felt I had taken this rage, pain, fear, and created a performance piece that touched and moved others. —Jackie Newman, participant.

This story is from one class at Omega Theater. Using the performing arts as vehicles for therapy and healing, education, personal growth and spiritual realization, Omega Theater has been evolving its artistic healing work for almost three decades.

Currently there are two training programs: one is an advanced 30-week training where students expand their definition of Artist to include Healer, Educator, and Shaman or Spiritual Guide. The other is a Drama Therapy and Sound Healing groups, where students work with sound and personal stories to speak and sing their truths. The faculty is composed of Saphira Linden, Nat Warren-White, and Sarah Benson.

Transformational Theater is a transpersonal theater art form and expressive therapy modality. In both the training and therapy settings, as well as in the theater environment, the creation of *temenos* (sacred container) allows a person's deepest self to surface and be worked with. In order to reach

this deepest self or soul essence, it is important to enter a sacred space. Using the methods of the Sufis, participants learn the tools to access and identify with this essential self.

SUFI PRINCIPLES

The core of the Sufi Teachings of Hazrat Inayat Khan include several principles that have inspired and been integrated into our work.

1. LOVE.

Embracing the totality of the heart's experience is the Sufi path—the path of the heart. It is said that all emotions have love as their base. Our therapeutic work is about helping clients (and audiences) accept and love themselves more and more—as we, as artist-healer practitioners learn to do the same. By honoring all of our emotional life—including fear, anger and frustration—as a natural part of not only our human life journey, but also as natural gifts on the spiritual path, the authentic experience of love can begin to be experienced.

2. GOD WITHIN.

Learning to identify with God within, also known as soul's essence, higher self, divine qualities, archetypal models (Masters, Saints, Prophets, gods/goddesses, heroes, heroines), helps overcome a personal sense of limitation and low self-esteem. It is our experience that when people can recognize and identify with this essential part of themselves, they are more able to look at the painful and wounded parts of themselves, without being as defended.

3. SACREDNESS and BEAUTY.

Cultivating the sense of the sacred and a sense of beauty. When a sacred space is created, a group develops trust and a sense of safety to explore difficult issues and traumatic memories. Similarly, such a performing space invites deeper audience involvement, passively and actively. Beauty in the work/performing environment helps to transmute the ugliness of emotional trauma. The atmosphere can become like a beautiful rose holding each person in her warm embrace and lovely fragrance.

4. ONENESS and UNITY.

Experiencing the interconnection and interdependence between all living beings (humans as well as other life forms) by breaking down the distinctions and differences that divide

people from people and people from their environment. Much of the work is about entering the consciousness of those with whom one is in conflict, and working toward embracing their emotional experience and points of view. We create exercises in nature that are designed to receive the healing power of Mother Earth and set up improvisations, meditations and creative exercises that relate a person's own experience (including challenges and future possibilities) to the experience of the earth.

5. MASTERY.

The development of personal capacity, responsibility, consciousness, as both thought and action, and the ability to be empowered to manifest one's greatest potential, which works toward the realization of the Self.

6. BALANCE.

It's been said that the essence of the teachings of the Sufi Message is balance: balance of Jemal and Jela, yin and yang, activity and repose, inner masculine and feminine, spirit and matter, transcendence and immanence.

7. LIFE AS ART.

The culmination of this work is when we apply our learning creatively in our everyday life; then our lives become works of art.

TRANSFORMATIONAL THEATER TRAINING

In the Transformational Theater training, trainees are taken through a series of processes. The first part of the training is designed to help the participants access their most challenging life issues, while connecting with their sources of strength or essential qualities. Our essential self can offer specific advice to the part of our being that is experiencing emotional turmoil and confusion. By identifying with that essential being, or soul essence, the trainee develops courage and is therefore motivated to go more deeply into the issues and blocks that are preventing the manifestation of their full potential in life. Participants learn the tools to access and identify with their essential selves. These tools, such as meditation and intuitive skills, allow development beyond a limiting view of self. Along the way, trainees craft a communicable theater piece with a beginning, middle, and end and eventually perform it to an invited audience. The performer accepts the responsibility to stay in touch with their own soul

qualities, while including the audience in the process. Here we are walking the fine line between therapy and art. The act of offering a gift of one's personal story to others, accessing the emotional resources it takes to create the form and being vulnerable enough to share it, offer participants the opportunity to leap forward in their own therapeutic transformational process.

*Transformational Theater has been very comfortable for me; it has given me a safe place to be open. In the class there is some kind of *unspoken* and *spoken* sacred trust. It comes from people knowing they are there to share an experience and be as fully themselves as they can be. It is the most phenomenal, safe environment I have ever experienced. —Jackie Newman*

Carl Jung said that the mental health of a society is based on people's ability to tell their own stories. The proliferation of the twelve-step recovery groups, and the expansion of the storytelling field as an art form, are indications of the broad-based need for people to access and communicate their life stories. The Transformational Theater process is a development of this naturally occurring impulse in our culture at this time.

When people can access their inner strength or personal soul essence, they are more able to access and communicate their trauma history. This makes it possible to transform these earlier wounded patterns into a new story. Transformation means becoming who we really are in essence, beyond the limited sense of ourselves.

APPLICATIONS

Over the course of the theater's history, there have been many applications of Drama Therapy in educational and corporate sectors. The creation of theater games to teach cognitive material to learning disabled children in

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*"There's no place to hide
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Transformational Theater

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schools throughout Massachusetts were one example. In another case, drama therapy changed a sterile state mental hospital classroom into a magical theater market environment, with each food section containing different pricing structures to accommodate a variety of learning levels. Disturbed and retarded adolescents learned basic math skills, at their own level, without embarrassment. They also enjoyed taking on the roles of shopkeepers, clerks, or consumers, in the food section that corresponded to their skill level.

We worked with drug, alcohol and food abusers to help them tell their stories to each other and to supportive audiences.

We called this process E.T. Theatre.

Environmental Theater (To Help Educate Adolescents Through the Reconstruction of Environments)

In the corporate world, actor-facilitators were each assigned to observe one manager. Later, with the managers present, each Actor assumed the role of the observed manager and played the subtext of the perceived feelings and thoughts that were not being expressed. The managers were then encouraged to explore the personal dynamics, communication, and issues that surfaced in the role-play.

These dimensions of Drama Therapy include many powerful tools

from theater. The technique of role reversal to resolve conflict and create better relationships comes directly from psychodrama. Drama Therapy embraces psychodrama but is broader and also includes educationally relevant participatory theater, autobiographical storytelling, and theater ritual experiences which are therapeutic.

PRODUCTIONS

The whole approach of using theater forms to help people identify with their higher self or soul essence was evolved in the pageants that Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan envisioned at Sufi Camps in the 1970s. Most notable was *The Cosmic Celebration*, a pageant celebrating the unity of the human family, which was produced for thirteen years in several cities in the United States and Europe. As many as 350 people were cast into roles according to their soul level. Everyone was given, by Pir Vilayat, an inner concentration of qualities that would help develop the character they were to portray for the audience. The rehearsal process helped people embody, sing, dance and dramatize the character from the consciousness of that inner concentration.

An exercise I developed originally for my own healing involves connecting with the Angelic Spheres through music, visualization and enactment. People are taken back in time to re-

member what it was like in the heavens, and relive the moment of deciding or resisting coming to the earth. Proceeding through birth, infancy, toddlerhood, childhood, adolescent years, young adult life and older adult experience helps people connect with core soul qualities and life challenges that have been recurring themes throughout their life.

SOUND HEALING

In the Drama Therapy and Sound Healing group, we help a participant find their own voice by singing their soul song, a method developed by my colleague, Sarah Benson. These songs are created spontaneously as an expression of the person's emotional state and transformational edge. Often the participant is sung to by the group and many times people are encouraged to move spontaneously to the sound, to more fully embody the experience.

It was so great, it worked immediately!— YES, I said, this is how you get it going! This is how it works for me: Move. Sound. Do it! This stands out incredibly because it was immediate, informative experience that really worked; it carried through beyond the moment to uplift my spirit. —David Hammond

There's no place to hide in the sound of our voice. It carries the vibration of the truth of the moment, of one's life: our fear, anger, guilt and

shame, love, joy, and delight. As we release these emotions through releasing the voice, the energy begins to flow with greater ease. We have more space to experience love, joy and soul integration which is also sounded by the voice. Songs of anger, songs of love walk hand in hand as we explore mysterious regions in the forest of the self. Music has been called the universal language of the soul that transcends individual religious, racial, ethnic bias or identities. We have found the most effective way of creating an attunement within a therapy or training group or within a public theater environment, is by consciously working with vibrational resonance. Weaving beautiful sound and music textures that open hearts creates a safe and nurturing chalice to contain our sacred stories. This helps participants feel safe about opening themselves to attune to the deeper dimensions of their life experience.

There will be a performance sharing in May of the Transformational Theater training program. Call (617) 522-8300 for info about the performance sharing, as well as next year's 9 month training program, (September 1995 - May 1996). Saphira Linden and Sarah Benson guide an ongoing healing group, and will be guiding a Sufi Womens' Retreat on June 17 in Boston and a two day retreat at Aegis at the Abode on July 22-23.