



Therapy Through Drama

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AMONG the staggering conundrums that baffle big cities today is the need to confront head-on the social and emotional maladjustments of an increasing number of children who suffer the handicaps of encapsulated neighborhoods. Youths skirting a survival existence of poverty are denied their intellectual, social, and mental health potential. Such a setting cannot allow for the full development or expression of emotional stability unless the children are provided with better compensatory educational and social opportunities for identifying and "acting out" than they typically receive.

One solution to a large part of the riddle resides in the emotional and cultural lacunas created by a sterile home environment. As the complexities of the urban ordeal grow in number and kind, schools must focus sharply on the early preparation of all children for socially and emotionally well-adjusted, self-fulfilling lives. The latter third of this century will witness social, political, and economic tumult of profound importance. Society's demands pose a precise charge to the schools—that our young people be meaningfully prepared for self-directed and productive living.

In helping pupils with severe or chronic learning problems, it is clear that no single discipline, therapy, or approach possesses the techniques or the practitioners to achieve educational or emotional nirvana. We must recognize at the very outset that the schools cannot go it alone. Through a multi-

disciplinary effort, we must link forces with parents, teachers, social workers, psychiatric consultants, psychologists, and mental health specialists if we are to unravel the enigmas of our time.

The writers submit that living theatre as well as the theatre of the mind viewed in a psycho-educational context afford a learning model for youth to assess present behavior modes, to consider alternative courses of action, and to construct positive self-image concepts and ultimate acceptance. In a well-conceived and well-executed "drama experience," the writers have used projective and acting-out techniques to enable children to unfold, to talk out surface disturbances, and eventually, to evaluate their role in a current crisis while planning adaptive behavior adjustments.

In this area, there is reason to believe that more effective use may be made of the psychologists in our schools. Observing, describing, and interpreting pupils' responses and reactions to various plot situations, psychologists can help teachers to understand in valuable ways the normal development as well as the latitude of variations that occur among children. In dealing with everyday symptomatic behavior, teachers can become more expert in reckoning with cause-effect relationships.

The stage is a natural place in the learning setting for psychologists to examine with teachers, and perhaps with pupils on appropriate occasions, group problems precipitated



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by environmental stresses, cultural conflicts, and educational rigidity. Group study can play a preventive role as teachers become more perceptive and knowledgeable about the etiology and social dynamics underlying individual and group behavior.

As a specialist in the theories of learning, motivation, perception, and memory, the psychologist, in a team approach, can train teachers to work with and in groups, guiding curriculum development and school organization.

Current learning trends reveal the vital impact that great dramatic literature can have upon disturbed and maladjusted children. Artfully and thoughtfully prepared, the live performance of a play in its natural environment, the theatre, can enrich young lives intellectually and emotionally. The stage can illuminate Plato's “cave of shadows” and bridge the gap that separates the child from a practical and realistic approach to his problem. Plot situations sharpen the pupil's powers of critical thinking and enable him to identify with the crisis being depicted.

The premise here is not to suggest that attendance at theatre performances or the reading of a play will unravel the Gordian knots of social and emotional maladjustment in the inner city limbo. Admittedly the stage is not a forum for mental health clinics (although Moreno's work with psycho-drama could prove otherwise) or a panacea promising a flash-in-the-pan educational elixir. But as a therapeutic and preventive adventure calculated to evoke and provoke the gamut of human stimuli-response sequences, drama as an art medium can compel a pupil to look at himself realistically, warts *et al.*, curse the darkness, kindle bright candles, and release promise, confidence, and self-esteem.

Theatre as Therapy

As coordinator of a motivation and enrichment project for three years at the Thomas A. Edison High School in Philadelphia, the junior writer has observed the emotional and social implications of theatre upon students from homes where little respect was

tendered the printed word or its purveyors. Many of the pupils had extensive police records and school histories of various infractions and difficulties.

Preparatory to attendance at any play, pupils in their English classrooms reviewed selected scenes designed to provide a framework for various interrelationships; the class considered the essential elements of the story line, studied characterization, and traced the author's theme. Pupils examined human behavior as reflected in naturalism, comedy, expressionism, problem plays, plays of social protest, theatre of the absurd, tragedy, black comedy, theatre-in-the-round, and avant garde theatre. They discovered the emotional components of cause and effect relationships that contributed to exposition, denouement, climax, soliloquy, turning point, *deus ex machina*, comic relief, aside, and chorus.

Each of the terms served as literary levers enabling the class to zero in on the ramifications and consequences of human decision making. Follow-up evaluations conducted in the classrooms resulted in informal group therapy sessions wherein pupil opinions mirrored individual behavior techniques and defenses. The desire to identify with a given character or situation cut loose the masks that pupils construct over the years to conceal pain, anxiety, or fear.

Man's needs, the source of conflict in drama as in life, were the themes of provocative performances by the National Shakespeare Company of New York City. *Shakespeare's World*, *Macbeth*, and *Julius Caesar*, presented in the school auditorium, graphically portrayed the convolutions and outcomes of frustration-aggression syndromes that led to lively class seminars. The National Drama Company staged *The World of Theater* at the school, highlighting selected works from Chekhov, Moliere, Shaw, Miller, Sophocles, and Wilder. Pupils reacted to humor, pathos, sympathy, greed, anger, and hostility in their analysis of character interaction, revealing their own perceptions of the problem. The importance of tempering one's impulses and desires for immediate gratification to maintain self-control and discipline was underscored.

At another assembly, poetry readings of stormy protest and rebellion by members of the Theatre of the Living Arts opened a Pandora's box of searing issues on the contemporary scene. Pupils gave vent to their inmost tensions and concerns in presenting individual interpretations and positions. They bristled with anger but were made to appreciate the need for tolerance for stress and anxiety in order to discover and employ constructive ways as motivation for solving their problems.

In legitimate theatre houses in center city, the pupils attended plays by the National Repertory Theatre which provided post-performance symposia and study guides on *Liliom*, *She Stoops To Conquer*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Trojan Women*, *The Madwoman of Chailot*, *The Rivals*, *Tonight at 8:30*, *A Touch of the Poet*, and the *Imaginary Invalid*. Through these experiences, the pupils, we believe, gained insights into their own behavior in accepting the basic needs of all human beings who experience such emotions as doubt, envy, and joy. The world of drama can help emphasize the individual's responsibility for satisfying needs or expressing feelings in ways which are consonant with Western Civilization's moral, civic, and religious heritage.

The boys celebrated the Old Vic's productions of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *As You Like It*. As milestones in their emotional maturity, the pupils applauded *The Deputy*, *Wait Until Dark*, *Hostile Witness*, *Inadmissible Evidence*, and *Ivanov* among others. The burden of data collected, though subjective and unscientific, leads the observers to conclude that living drama can help youngsters to see all people as individuals, not as stereotypes, springing from a particular racial, religious, economic, social, or national background. Plays can enable teachers to encourage in pupils the avoidance of hate, prejudice, ignorance, and cruelty as the end-products of misunderstanding and irrational behavior. Once the psychic debris of a performance is penetrated, it is not too difficult to bring to the fore those values that should command the respect of youthful audiences. Worth more than the myriad

words of a teacher's tirade or a parent's harangue, an actor's lines wedded to expert gesture can delineate personal integrity, honesty, fair play, rising above temporary successes and easy material benefits.

Serving the Community

Using grants from Title I under ESEA and private foundation funds, the Philadelphia Drama Guild points up the shift in the school's traditional *modus operandi* in servicing the community's needs. When live theatre becomes a curriculum-centered enterprise, the classroom reaches out into the crucible of the community in a quest for relevant and responsive learning experiences, and thus possibilities for promoting wholesome mental health are educationally enhanced. Each year thousands of urban youth, using free or greatly reduced tickets, crowd the Guild's center city playhouse.

In cooperation with school personnel and children, the Drama Guild selects four plays for the school year; classroom objectives are realistic and are integrated into the teachers' plans. Master leaders conduct discussions following the performances. Skillful teachers alert their pupils to those aspects of the play that can help them acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for competent living. No one can deny the excitement of the informal interviews backstage with members of the cast, staff, or production crews. Prominently displayed throughout the school, photographs of students with dates or parents and well-known actors or area personalities help to build self-acceptance and self-respect.

For the past several years, the Drama Guild has brought together thousands of public school and suburban youths to discuss and analyze plays. This social blending allows for a contact and articulation that permits each young person to see himself as a unique individual, with the right to be himself and to develop his own special talents and resources. Exploring the broad spectrum of the humanities, the searching young pupil considers the place of art, religion, and human behavior as he strives toward a unity of man-

kind. Given his limitations and problems, his assets and liabilities, the youth searches for a purpose above and beyond selfish interests, recognizing the welfare of others and extending to them the same rights of individuality for which he yearns in a pluralistic society.

Apart from increased knowledge which the program fosters, one observes unmistakable changes emerging in pupil behavior. Having attended *Playboy of the Western World*, *You Can't Take It With You*, *Front Page*, and *Candida*, the playgoers manifest a diminishing lack of self-consciousness as they venture into unfamiliar terrain. They appear more willing to withstand the bitterness of novelty, and to accept responsibilities for planning and attending events with equanimity. They respect the necessity for promptness, punctuality, proper attire, and acceptable audience behavior. Able to exchange ideas with greater confidence and freedom, the pupils are stretching for mature judgments and insights, distinguishing valid from vapid ideas and opinions.

The cultivation of positive attitudes has a value that is difficult to minimize or ignore in any endeavor to develop sound mental health outlooks. Nor can one underscore too strongly the sense of accomplishment inner city youth derive in identifying and affiliating with an activity they regard as central to their school lives.

In short, drama and literature can take city pupils to the wellsprings of our culture, sharing with them the refinements of heart and mind that have shaped our heritage. Simultaneously and perhaps more important, the theatre, couched in a mental health curriculum, can proffer one of the keys for fashioning preventive and therapeutic approaches, structured to reduce or remove the disabling social, educational, and emotional conditions that handicap our children in the embedded schools.

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