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## ***Theatre for change - 'The art of looking at ourselves'***

**A Workshop presented at  
the Reconnect Conference  
'Putting Families in the Picture'  
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The following are notes which support the above workshop. If you would like to talk with me about anything in these pages or discuss use of theatre as used as a resource of personal development, please get in touch.

### ***Workshop description***

*'Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.' It is '...the art of looking at ourselves.' So says Augusto Boal, esteemed drama guru from Brazil. And I agree. It is this that makes it so powerful. Related to but different from role play (which some people just do not like), theatre can be simple or elaborate, verbal or non-verbal, a simple facial gesture, an observation, a story or simply walking across a room with attitude. And to be fair to the great art of theatre and drama, this approach is NOT about creating great theatre. It is about using a tool which can help people with their lives. It is theatre with a purpose for families and groups, and even perhaps surprisingly, with individuals. And this purpose is education or therapy, growth, change, dealing with disturbing feelings, managed problems, enhancing relationships or imagining a new future. And all of that is what this workshop is about. A practical and hands-on experience of how both the strategies and the principles of theatre can be used in helping people create better lives for themselves.*

## Background thinking to this approach

I am not a theatre person, I am a therapist and educator. I make no claims whatsoever for creating theatre of any significance in terms of what a real theatre person might regard as 'theatre'. I use the ideas and strategies of theatre as a way of looking at issues of social and personal significance. For me, theatre in this context, is functional. I am using it for a particular purpose. Yet theatre and its tools I find offer an incredibly powerful way of looking at the things that trouble individuals, families, communities and societies. I owe a great debt to all forms of 'real theatre' and its practitioners. I have borrowed your ideas and I hope that I use them with respect.

The following comments are from Augusto Boal's 'Games for actors and non-actors. (see last page for the full reference). They sum up nicely my thoughts about theatre.

**'Humans are capable of seeing themselves in the act of seeing, of thinking their emotions, of being moved by their thoughts. They can see themselves here and imagine themselves there; they can see themselves today and imagine themselves tomorrow.'** (page xxvi)

And repeating the quotes from the beginning of these notes:

**'This is theatre – the art of looking at ourselves.'** (page xxx)

**'Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.'** (page xxxi)

Theatre can be powerful because it can show things which are not quite 'real'; possibilities, dreams, fears. It can add a sense of the surreal and take people into thoughts, feelings and actions which they may not otherwise consider. 'Theatre' as I use it here does not necessarily mean 'terrific performance', but activities and techniques which are often associated with acting and performing, and which can be adapted for a variety of purposes. 'Theatre' in this process may or may not involve some performance. It may simply mean the use of theatrical techniques to help create a process, a sense of intimacy and connection, a sense of fun, a means of expression and communication. There are three aspects of theatre that I find of great value in the work I do.

### Key elements

- Theatre as in a play or performance of some kind. That is, people acting out something, possibly as brief as 30 seconds and possibly with no rehearsal
- Theatre strategies. Activities that help prepare actors for performance
- Theatre ideas or principles.

All three of these are explored in the following.

## **General acknowledgement and thanks**

I often do not know where activities have come from. Some I have seen people use, some I have read about, some I have made up. I acknowledge the source whenever I know what it is and I have given several references at the end that I think are useful. So here let me say thanks to anyone who has made a contribution to theatre and theatre in education. You have helped me.

## **Handle with care!**

Each of these activities, while sometimes playful, can also evoke powerful emotions. They need to be used carefully and sensitively.

## **Using the strategies**

### **'Performance' theatre and role play**

There is some overlap here for sure. Yet there are differences as well. For one thing, I find the term 'role play' sends some people running for cover. Admittedly so does the term 'theatre.' However I have often found people saying to me after a group: 'I don't like role play but that was fun.' So here are some of the possible differences.

- Theatre is, fairly reasonably, more likely to be 'theatrical' in that there is more of a sense of performance
- There may be directions: 'Starting now. And.....action!'
- The players may be placed on a 'stage'. Often just a designated space in a room
- Players can really 'act' if they want. This is not behaviour rehearsal and the performance might be aiming for a quite over-the-top portrayal of something rather than an accurate realistic recreation
- It can deal with, and express, things which are not tangible. Rather than try to show something which is realistic, performance might represent ideas or emotions, states of minds or attitudes. An emotion can be expressed as a word only, or a look. Words can be removed altogether so that actions become the medium of communication
- Playing a character can give some emotional 'distance' of safety to be able to explore an issue. The person is present and involved, but via the medium of a character.

### **The process builds**

Usually as the complexity or risk of the theatrical task increases, it can be matched by an increase in the sensitivity of the topic being addressed or the depth or level of intimacy with which the topic is approached. This paralleling of the process is quite intentional and like all aspects of this process is quite open and transparent whether actually named or not.

- The complexity of the actual technique increases
- The level of 'performance' required increases
- The risk in terms of the difficulty of the activity increases
- The social or personal significance of the topic increases
- The increased personal depth to which the topic is taken increases.

## **The tools of the trade. Performance, theatre activities and ideas**

### ***Opening strategies***

#### **Draw a 6 and a 9**

- With one hand draw a '6' in the air...simultaneously draw a '9' in the air with your foot.

#### **Purpose**

- To introduce the idea of doing something difficult
- To get used to the idea of doing things imperfectly and feeling okay about this. (This activity comes I think from Augusto Boal).

#### **Image of the hour**

Show us what you are usually doing on week days at seven in the morning...at eight in the morning....at ten....at midday.....at three in the afternoon.....

#### **Purpose**

- To signal that speaking will not be the only means of communication in the process to follow
- To develop an exchange between those present. (This activity also comes from Augusto Boal).

### ***Image Theatre***

Image theatre is an action method. That is, it is deliberately done without words. This offers less verbal people a strategy of communication as well as focusing on the power of an image without the distraction of words. Image theatre can be done in many ways. One way is for people to do simple actions as in mime, or 'strike a pose' to represent something. The idea is to capture and show something: a thought, a feeling, an idea, an aspect of a conflict, of a dilemma, of a distressing event, of an inspiring moment, of a fear or a desire, of a moment in the past or the future, and represent it in the image. The image can be done with minimal movement or it can be frozen, and appear as a snap-shot or a video or 'freeze-frame'. It is usually more difficult for people to do the frozen image, just because being 'frozen' feels quite unusual. Consequently the images need to be held for just a few moments.

Image theatre can be done very quickly, it can be done standing, moving or from the comfort of a person's chair. Below is a very simple version of image theatre. The sources for these ideas are many, but again Augusto Boal is a great source.

#### **What has it been like lately, to be part of your family/life/relationship?**

- Three people represent:
  - One good thing
  - One not-so-good thing
  - One thing which seems to be a combination of good and not-so-good

- Show the image, to the group, or the other person or the family
- Ask others to say what they think is being presented
- What comments do they have?
- What questions would they like to ask?
- What would they most want to show if they did an image?

### **Purpose**

To communicate ideas and feelings.

## ***Sculptures***

Another powerful and sometimes more challenging way of doing image theatre is for one person to be another person's 'clay' and that person then 'sculpts' the person to represent something. This involves touch and so needs to be done only in situations where it would be appropriate and where there is comfort and trust. Young people will sometimes be tempted to do the obvious frivolous or even vulgar sculptures. Expect this and manage it in whatever way works best for you. Often this is just playfulness and a pre-emptive comment or a brief chat before you start or as you go is often enough. Just a comment along the way reminding people to focus on sculpting respectfully is often helpful. However, again I would remind you to only do sculpting with people where there is enough connection and mutual respect for it to be productive.

As well as the obvious parts of the body, some people do not like their faces being touched and so indicating by an expression what you would like the other person to do is a perfectly okay way to do a sculpture. The sculptures are usually done in silence so as not to distract from the image itself. Silence can be difficult, for people of all ages!

### **One person 'sculpts' another**

One person 'sculpts' the other to show:

- how they are feeling right now; or..
- what concerns them most; or
- what inspires them most; or..
- what they most want to be as a person; or...
- anything at all!

### **Purpose**

A way of 'speaking', of saying something but without using words.

### **'Facing' images**

Two circles, one facing in and one facing out. People pair off to face one other person. One person 'sculpts' the other to show, for example, how one person might be feeling in a conflict. These images are viewed by everyone. The second circle is 'sculpted' to show how the other person might be feeling. (Or how they might be seen by the first person). These are also viewed. Then the pairs of images are viewed pair by pair.

### **Purpose**

To 'look at' the nature of an interaction or a relationship. To develop insight and empathy.

## Things for workers to consider

- You can ask people to show something real, something concrete (eg a scene) or something more abstract (eg a feeling or desire)
- Often it is useful to start with something concrete so people can become familiar with the technique first
- 'Real' is not the same as 'true.' A person might show a scene with someone on their knees weeping. This may not have happened in reality but is 'true' in terms of how they felt
- You can work with the general or the personal. For example, how we think families are OR how OUR family is
- The second is usually more risky and difficult. And again, starting with the general can be a way to lead into the personal
- You can show external or internal. As above, you can show a scene if you want to explore behaviour, or you can show thoughts and feelings if this is a more useful focus
- What we as therapists or educators ask people to show in image theatre or to sculpt is incredibly important. We can be cautious or daring, supportive or challenging. This of course we decide by discussion and our own judgment. But it is important to constantly bear this in mind as we proceed.

## ***Activities to develop a process***

These activities can be used at any point in a process. Just when is matter of judgment. The first few, 'Think of a day' and 'Imagine yourself as someone' are useful activities for groups where some people prefer to be more active and others prefer to be more in a spectator role. They can also be quite useful strategies to move into Image Theatre, Sculptures or Forum Theatre (See next few pages for Forum).

### **Think of a day**

- ...that you have had, think of what happened...
- ...get up and walk to a chair and sit in it...
- ...continue to think of the day...
- ...we will try and tell you what happened on that day, and what sort of a day it was for you.

### **Purpose**

- To explore body language, and the idea that we 'communicate', give messages, 'tell' others something of ourselves, whether we choose to or not
- To start to develop understanding and empathy between group members.

### **Imagine yourself as 'someone'. Take on a character**

- ...decide where you are going...
- ...decide whether you are early, on time, or late...
- ...walk across the room...
- ...we will try and guess all the above.

### **Purpose**

The same as 'Think of a day' as above.

### **Multiple views (based on image theatre)**

Four images are created:

- How person one believes they are seen by the other
- Similarly, how person two believes they are seen by the other
- How person one would like to be seen
- How person two would like to be seen.

### **Purpose**

To develop understanding and empathy between those in a relationship; parents and children, friends, couples. Or different groups; eg women and men; or different cultural groups.

### **The meeting. A wordless piece of theatre**

- Build the story together. Ask the group members the following questions and build up the story:
  - where does the meeting happen?
  - when?
  - what is the weather like?
  - what sex and age is each person?
- Once you have the story
  - Each of the characters then decides for themselves separately and privately why they might be in that situation and what they might be doing
  - The characters enter the 'scene...'
  - At some point they notice each other
- The action is frozen and the group can be asked questions like
- What do people notice here about how the two characters are relating? Do they seem to know each other?
- One character remains frozen and the other 'advances' the action and freezes again.
  - What has changed?
  - What is the feel now?
- The second character 'advances' the action and freezes?
  - What is the feel now?
  - What does each character have in mind?

### **Purpose**

The purpose is to firstly look at how people 'read' each other's intentions. However, equally important for the process of a group, is the building of the story together, which tells people it is a democratic process and everyone is welcome to have input into it.

### ***Forum theatre***

Much has been written about Forum theatre. Both about the extraordinary usefulness of it as an approach and about some of the significant problems that can be experienced in how it is developed and how it is presented and facilitated. With respect for all that has gone before, I add my own comments here as a contribution to the ongoing use and development of this very worthwhile creative approach.

Forum theatre has been developed by Augusto Boal and is an interactive form of theatre for the purpose of problem-solving. It can be powerful and very useful. I have been using this method for many years now and have adapted and changed it to suit my own style and the needs of the people I work with. Consequently I encourage you to go to the works of Boal for a fuller and much more original description and explanation of what Forum is all about.

Forum for me works something like this: A short scene (or scenes) based on some issue which affects both actors and audience is acted out. The whole process is facilitated by a person who is not part of the acting but stands outside it and can speak both to the actors and the audience. A key idea here is the notion of 'spectactors'. That Theatre for change. 'The art of looking at ourselves'. Peter Slattery

is, that actors and spectators are interchangeable. The play or series of scenes is performed for an audience. It is then replayed and on this second occasion, audience members are invited to call 'stop' at any point when they feel they have an idea they would like to try out to solve the problem being shown. They then replace one of the actors on stage and try the intervention. If something is working out but seems unrealistic, audience members can call 'magic' and offer an alternative intervention. At any time the theatre is stopped it can be 'rewound' to a point where the audience member feels the intervention should take place. It is not permitted to replace any player who might be a key person in creating a problem. For example, if a person is acting in a bullying way, it is not permitted to solve the problem by simply replacing this person and turning them into a more friendly, loving human being. The play continues and explores lots of options for sorting out a problem.

The following brief notes are best read with a solid understanding of Boal's intentions and strategies. So please do consult the original source. These comments are a result of the experiences I have had in my use of this very valuable approach.

#### **Developing a script. Work out:**

- What is happening?
- Where it is happening?
- Who is involved?
- When it is happening?
- What does each character want to have happen?

#### **Things to be mindful of**

- Forum theatre must be repeatable. That is, it must be rehearsed, so that as it is played and replayed the original situation can still be recognized
- There must be some tension, a problem to be solved
- As the script develops it will become clear who can and who can't be replaced
- If character A is replaced and then a second intervention replaces character B, it may be necessary to replace character A with the original player to retain the outline of the original script
- Actors must not give in too easily. At the same time they do need to respond positively to interventions if they think their character would respond in this way
- The phrase 'stop' can be used to stop the show and try something new
- The phrase 'magic' can be used to stop the show if the intervention is working but it is unrealistic
- The audience must be 'warmed up' to the idea of becoming physically involved
- If someone really does not want to replace one of the characters, they can direct that character from the audience...
- At the same time, Forum is an action method and it is important it does not collapse into discussion alone
- Sometimes the strategy offered doesn't fit for who *this* character is. It may work however for a different person in the same situation
- Sometimes solutions will lie outside the event we are seeing
- Sometimes two or three scenes across time can be useful

- Sometimes a solution can be found by spontaneously
  - Adding a scene
  - Adding another character
- The role of the facilitator or director is extremely important. Sometimes they might need to stop the performance themselves and ask the audience for comments.

### **Technical details**

- Do **make sure there is dramatic interest** in the piece of theatre. There must be more than issues or topics shown. It must be intriguing theatre
- It helps a lot if actors face the front...
- ...and speak up
- The piece of theatre, or each scene will need a dramatic 'out' point
- 'Side coach' if necessary. That is, give low-voiced brief comments about how to continue. For example, 'keep going', 'speak up'
- If the actors can't be heard/seen, stop it and make adjustments.

### **Be careful of**

- Creating a scene of brutality or ugliness which simply distresses an audience
- Creating a scene which is built on stereotypes
- Creating a scene which can trap characters in their negative view of a situation. (Eg. one which does not suggest difference or alternative)
- Creating a scene that suggests the oppressed person is responsible for changing the behaviour of the oppressor
- Introducing too many inter-related dynamics which though relevant, are not the focus of the piece of Forum; such as gender issues or sexuality or cultural dynamics
- Maintaining balance. There is a fine balance to be attained between a sense of theatre and a sense of reality. Sometimes if people in an audience feel that they are assessed or judged or that their skills are being assessed or judged they will, understandably, be reluctant to become involved.
- The theatre needs to:
  - be real enough so as to be useful
  - be theatrical enough so as to suggest that there is an element of acting
  - be presented in such a way as to invite participation from the audience.

### **Possible warm up sequence**

- Draw a 6 and a 9
- Image of the hour
- Stand up, sit down
- Yell out 'stop' and 'magic'

## ***Theatre and individuals***

Perhaps surprisingly, I find theatre has a delightful and powerful application with individuals. It may be in the form of saying something to a person like: 'Do you know what you looked like when you came in here this evening?' And then pulling a face or walking across the room to show the person your view. Or it may be 'an internal view'

you choose to show. 'Shall I show you what sort of mood I think you were in when you arrived today?' And then pull the face or do the walk according to what you think the person was thinking or feeling at the moment. Basically this is Image Theatre.

You might use the strategy described earlier 'Think of a day' and ask the person in front of you to guess what sort of day you have had. This can lead into a discussion of how we read the world around us and what we project into that world.

Equally you might use an idea like 'Keep the action on stage', (see below) by focusing on the person in front of you and encouraging them to see their life not as dependent on the good or whim of others, but of their own making, and they can contribute to that making right now.

### ***Theatre principles and ideas from a therapist's perspective***

There are endless ideas I could explore here, but I will focus on a few just briefly in an attempt to highlight how therapy and education might borrow very productively from the world of theatre.

#### **True not real**

This idea I have referred to before. An image of grief or joy may not be how a person actually looks at those moments but can be a powerful representation of how they actually feel.

#### **Externalize**

An image of a problem, a dilemma or a dream gives people something to literally look at, comment on, or alter. It can make ideas or dynamics observable, accessible and discussable.

#### **What is my motivation?**

In theatre each character asks themselves: 'what is it that I want in this scene?' And this is a powerful dynamic in people's lives. What do you want from this relationship? What would you like your partner/daughter/son/parent to actually do at that moment?

#### **Advance the action**

A character in a play will 'advance the action' by doing something to help them get what they want. This is clearly useful in working with people in discussion of their lives. What is your next step? How will you take it? Do you need any help in this?

#### **Keep the action on stage**

The idea of 'keeping the action on stage' I find powerful. If a person is thinking of their life as being outside of their control, driven by other people's views or expectations, I will bring the conversation back to what the person can do themselves to make a difference, what is their next step, what do they do with their feelings about what is happening around them?

#### **Accept an offer and extend it**

This is a theatrical idea actors use to think about how a story might develop. A person, in character, says something. The other actor can respond in many ways including by simply rejecting or accepting the idea. For therapy and education, this simple idea of accepting an offer can be quite profound. Whatever life hands to us, what do we do

with that? It doesn't mean accepting things we don't like, it means accepting the idea that at times life sometimes simply presents us with something awful. It is then up to us as to what we do in response. We can fight against the idea, or we can accept the reality of this and decide how we will respond.

### ***Good luck***

That's it for this workshop and these notes. And notes are all they are, a way of remembering something and keeping alive some ideas that you might like to explore more. I hope they are helpful. Good luck and I would be delighted to hear from you. Cheers!

### **References**

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