

**Gill Straker**

## **PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC METAMECHANISMS**

An important move for psychology was a reframing of the question 'what is psychotherapy?' to 'what is psychotherapeutic?' This relatively recent broadening of perspective is not unique to psychology. In art for example, the issue of what 'is good or bad' art is prefaced by an even more basic question, viz. 'what is art?'

No clear cut answers to these questions exist, and certainly this paper will not attempt to give any general answers. Rather through the description of personal experiences of people engaged in a particular art form, viz. drama I will attempt to communicate some of my own ideas. The essence of these ideas is that the dramatic and the therapeutic have many elements in common. The idea that drama may be therapeutic or that therapy may be dramatic is not a new one. It is not however the intention of this paper to explore the therapy-drama interface theoretically. Rather through describing the unfolding experiences of audience and actress in one particular play, some attempt will be made to penetrate this interface in a more living manner.

The play in question was written by a South American writer and is entitled *Miss Magharida's Way*. The play has only one character, Miss Magharida, a megalomaniac teacher, whose authoritarianism knows no bounds. The aim of the play is to comment on the madness of society which commits helpless victims, viz. children into the hands of tyrants. To these tyrants, it then grants unlimited powers. The play is predicated on the notion that its audience has itself been subjected to the school system, and therefore has a memory reservoir on which to draw on the apprehension of the play. The play aims to recreate the emotional environment of the school situation and uses this emotional memory reservoir as its fuel.

The play is in the genus of street theatre, but takes place in the confines of a small room with an audience of about 30 people. The stage is conventionally in the front of the room (where teachers usually stand) but is not raised. The props are simple,

comprising black-board, chalk, lab. charts etc. The play begins with the entry of Miss Magharida who locks the only exit from the room, thus the audience, like the child, is at the mercy of Miss Magharida. From here on the play begins, or rather is created as any organic process between actress and audience, teacher and class. Some passages are scripted. These passages are mainly those in which Miss Magharida either tells of her power or those which serve as the vehicle through which the ultimate disintegration of Miss Magharida is illuminated, as she occasionally glimpses through her own defences into the ultimate destructiveness of her authoritarianism. For the rest, the play evolves between Miss Magharida and her audience. The play goes beyond audience participation to the point of audience creativity - the audience is the play - the process the art, the content merely the vehicle. For me, however, what was of interest was not so much the evolution of the play itself but the evolution within the process of the audience's experience and the development of a particular artist within this play.

My comments about the audience are based on my own participation at a performance as well as interviews with a number of people who had seen the play on different nights. Comments about the artist are based on an in-depth interview with her and an evening of social interaction.

The night I saw the play, it had been running for several weeks and had had a certain amount of press coverage. Some of the audience, therefore, had certain expectations about what was to develop. In this sense, the drama of the play had already begun even before the actress made her appearance. The seating in the theatre was not allocated and therefore at least the early comers could even position themselves in terms of underlying feelings about a recreated classroom situation. Thus the audience, including myself and those accompanying me, right from the outset began to operate in terms of emotional sets. Did we wish to be conspicuous to teacher and sit in the front, or inconspicuous and therefore sit at the side, or in a control position at the back? The fact that the audience was involved even before the formal onset of the play was immediately used by Miss Magharida in a very powerful and dramatic way.

Miss Magharida opened the play with the most basic of challenges, viz. why, when we knew the play involved participating in a situation with a tyrant had we not only come to the play but actually paid money to be badgered, harangued and tyrannized. Two points emerge about this opening, firstly, it could only have

been used as an opening after the play had had some exposure, thus illustrating the evolution of the play, not only within performances but across performances; secondly, the opening immediately laid the structure for the rest of the play. It illuminated that the play intended questioning consciousness at a very basic level.

While we as audience may have questioned how we would react to the play, I doubt many of us had questioned why we were there at all. I believe that this opening did have a dramatic impact, and feel that its dramatic quality lay at least partly in the successful way it penetrated layers of consciousness to question fundamental assumptions.

A second quality of these opening lines was that in them, content and process mirrored each other very accurately. The whole content of the play *Miss Magharida's Way*, concerned the stupidity of a society which repeatedly commits children to a repressive educational system. The opening gambit of the play created a process in which the audience was challenged to question its own stupidity in the here and now. This in itself created an emotional reaction. In looking at these opening lines, I was struck by the similarity of those ingredients which contributed to its dramatic impact to ingredients which contribute to psychotherapeutic growth.

It is a sine qua non of the psychodynamic and humanistic therapies that emotional growth potential is released when the therapist helps the client question his own basic assumptions. Further, it is accepted that for this questioning to be therapeutic, it must be emotive in some way. One way of evoking emotion is to shift from content to process, e.g. from content to interpersonal process or from verbal content to body language. The skill the therapist has in meshing the content and process in a way which mirrors for the client the recognizable flesh and form of his content as well as the unsuspected skeletal metatheory which underlies and directs this content, will determine the therapeutic potential of an interaction.

Returning to the play, it would appear that skilful mirroring was exactly what Miss Magharida achieved in her opening gambit. As mentioned before, the relationship between therapy and drama has long been recognized. Even when the audience is passive, it has been posited that merely observing theatre has effects both in terms of catharsis and modelling. However, the clearest recognition of the therapeutic potential of drama is perhaps

embodied in psychodrama. Here active participation in drama is used in itself as a psychotherapeutic agent. In psychodrama however, the scenario and roles are tailored to the needs of each actor and represents the replaying of a unique life script of the individual person. The dynamic tension of the psychodrama lies in the individual's own unique inner conflicts. These conflicts which are unique to the individual, nevertheless very often have their origin in certain standard contexts such as the home, the parent-child relationship, the school etc. In the play *Miss Magharida's Way*, this tendency for inner conflicts to be generated by the standard situations within a particular culture was exploited. In this sense, *Miss Magharida's Way* was similar to conventional theatre which relies on the ability of the audience to identify with the conflicts in a plot. However, it departs from conventional theatre by not only facilitating the identification of the audience with the plot, but by allowing the audience to script the plot. In this sense, the play comes closer to a specific scenario viz. the classroom situation and the scripting is more a collective development than an individual one, although within this collection there was room for some individual development. A brief look at how some individuals did develop may now be of interest.

From both my interview with the actress, who played Miss Magharida and those with various members of the audience, it seems as though individual reactions tended to occur in terms of certain recurrent patterns. The patterns of reactions could be characterised as those of the rebel, the placator and the detached observer. Given that Miss Magharida defined the play at the onset as one of domination subordination, it was interesting that the reaction patterns emerged in this way.

A great deal of literature, both experimental and theoretical, which has studied individuals under repressive conditions, such as concentration camps, prisons etc. has described similar reaction patterns. The phenomena of the individual who identifies with the aggressor, or organises resistance movements or alternatively collaborates, have been well described. Obviously these patterns only manifested themselves in a very mild form in the play, but that they did occur was interesting. On the night I attended the play, we had both our collaborators who tried to bribe Miss Magharida with chocolate and our resistance organisers, who in the interval tried to mobilise the audience to resist the abuse. An interesting development in the interval was the extent to which audience members who had never met each other before,

got together to discuss the play and strategies of defence. It was a classic case of individuals uniting against the common enemy. Thus, the play had succeeded, not only in stimulating individual conflicts and modes of reaction, but there was also a dynamic occurring at the group level.

This dynamic at the group level was interesting as it operated both for and against the individual. On one level, there was a feeling of group solidarity in which the individual felt safe. On another level, if an individual monopolised the floor, and didn't give Miss Magharida a chance to go on with her tyrannies and her soliloquies, the audience would unite with Miss Magharida to silence the individual, thus tacitly sanctioning her power. This reaction tied in with the data elicited from in-depth interviews I conducted with various members of the audience. A common reaction of these individuals was to feel themselves challenged by Miss Magharida. Men particularly felt challenged by her and many reported a need to sexually dominate her. Women more often reported feeling a little afraid of her and a wish to avoid her picking on them. However, both men and women felt challenged by her and reported some element of excitement. This led me to query the possibility that Miss Magharida was appealing to sado-masochistic fantasies which the audience could allow itself to experience in the full knowledge that nothing would happen in reality. If this was in fact so, then clearly once again an interface between therapy and drama could be said to exist. In therapy, as in this situation, the individual is provided with a safe environment in which to explore fantasy on the understanding that much of this fantasy will not be acted upon in reality. This is particularly true of the psychodynamic relational contract, which is predicated upon the exploration of the unfolding fantasy of the client in relation to the therapist. It is essential for therapy that the fantasy be allowed to develop, but while the client is encouraged in this exploration, care is also taken to maintain certain reality ties. The formal context of the therapeutic alliance viz. boundaries, offices, appointments etc. keeps the client in contact with the fact that it is fantasy, and not reality that is being explored.

Theatre too has its rituals for maintaining fantasy-reality boundaries. That certain formalities and rituals are essential in maintaining fantasy-reality boundaries was confirmed in the play *Miss Magharida's Way*. This play to some extent broke down many of the accepted rituals which exist in conventional theatre. The stage was integrated into the audience, as were the props;

there were no curtains, formal units and entrances, and it was this which I believe led to some blurring of the reality-fantasy boundary. For most people in the audience, this blurring was only sufficient to allow their reactions to be particularly emotive. For others, albeit a minority, there seemed to be a greater reality-fantasy breakdown; e.g. a few people actually resorted to throwing things at Miss Magharida, behaviour which is not generally considered acceptable at this time in Western culture. This behaviour was witnessed by me at the performance I attended and Miss Magharida reported that it was a frequent occurrence. An exaggerated form of this attack with a sexual overtone also occurred on one or two occasions when Miss Magharida was actually physically manhandled by a member of the audience. This was however, a rare occurrence; but the fact that it happened at all and that Miss Maghardia had a protector in the audience during performances because of her awareness of the kind of emotionality generated in the audience, says a great deal. However, it is posited here that this very emotionality and reality-fantasy blurring was what helped to make the play dramatic, just as these elements help to make therapy therapeutic.

This brings us to the actress herself. Thus far I have made no distinction between Miss Maghardia and the actress whose name is Michelle. This probably reflects the quality of acting in which there was a fusion of actress and role. Despite the telephonic contact I had with Michelle while negotiating an interview, I was still unprepared for my meeting with her. I had made some private speculations about her, e.g. that Miss Magharida probably represented a part of herself, possibly the shadow and that Michelle would to some extent be the fragile opposite of herself. Looking back on this I perceive in it the shaping of my own consciousness, taught to think in polarity, dualism and dichotomy without due concern for complexity and partial truths.

The first shock on meeting Michelle was that she was only 21 years old. While I had expected Michelle to shadow the tough, authoritarian Miss Magharida, I certainly did not expect youth. The skill with which Miss Magharida handled her audience, the sharpness of repartee and the ability to turn the remarks of a considerably older audience back upon themselves was somehow associated with a depth of appreciation of subtlety and nuance acquired over time. This then was the first adjustment I had to make viz. that Michelle's appreciation of emotional subtlety came from the intensity of her living rather than the length of it. Another adjustment which I soon had to make concerned

the different frameworks within which Michelle and I were apprehending the play. What had fascinated me about the play was the degree to which Michelle in the role of Miss Magharida seemed to be able to assess who she could pick on in the audience and in what way. I knew a number of the audience members, I interviewed well, and I was thus able to perceive the accuracy with which Miss Magharida had devised strategies for dealing with them, using them as foils or making them teacher's pet. She also honed into individual vulnerabilities and used them with accuracy e.g. she asked one person in the audience who does have difficulty with his sexuality if he masturbated, while another very aggressive individual who told me she had attended the performance to be provocative, she avoided provoking at all. The possibility that there had been a meshing of unconscious minds was intriguing. However, if this was the case, it was certainly Michelle's unconscious that did the meshing, as consciously she did not relate to their idea at all. In fact, she had some difficulty grasping what I was driving at. She was consciously aware of certain strategies she had intuitively evolved for containing situations, e.g. when someone threw something at her she picked on an innocent person in proximity to the perpetrator of the act as a way of evoking self control e.g. guilt. This of course is not an unusual strategy for teachers who are known to punish the whole class because of a single individual. However, as far as the idea of an unconscious mesh was concerned, Michelle did not relate to this at all.

For Michelle the play had been primarily a social comment on the school system. She related to the psychological aspect of it only in so far as the personality and psychology of the character Miss Magharida was concerned. As for her own development, she felt that as the play had evolved, she had moved from a concern with portraying the prototype of the authoritarian personality, through the being of Miss Magharida, to using the character of Miss Magharida to make a social comment.

Michelle felt that this reflected her own growing maturity both within the role and within herself. She told me that, part of this growing maturity was an ability to split off Miss Magharida as a role outside of herself as an actress and person. As one can imagine, exposing oneself to the kind of aggression invited by Miss Magharida could be a traumatic experience. Therefore the ability to make a clear differentiation between aggression directed at Miss Magharida as opposed to aggression directed at the self would be essential. What was of note in this regard

was the reasons Michelle had chosen the role of Miss Magharida. She told me that she had graduated from drama school some months prior to embarking on this role. She had found her last year at graduate school a traumatic experience which had shattered her confidence and stifled her creativity. She needed both to affirm herself and her creativity and to prove that she could act. As there were no immediate parts forthcoming, Michelle decided that the only possible outlet for her was to choose a one person act and try and get both a director and a sponsor. A friend about the same age as herself undertook the task of direction and a small experimental theatre company agreed to stage the performance for a short run. The play was seen by one of the bigger theatre owners and Michelle found both the success and the affirmation for which she had searched.

Michelle's choice of Miss Magharida was not arbitrary. While she had not found graduate school a totally enriching experience, there were blocks which had been meaningful. One of these was the psychodrama block. Both the idea and the experience of drama as a healing process were therefore known to her. The idea of extending the experimental aspect of drama to the audience was an appealing one to which she related at a gut level and she perceived the potential for this in *Miss Magharida's Way*.

Furthermore, she perceived in Miss Magharida a character she could relate to. At some level, she saw Miss Magharida both in her role of the oppressor and the oppressed as parts of herself. She had been brought up jointly by divorced parents. She described her mother as philosophical and intellectual with little ability to translate her idealistic ideas into day-to-day child care. Her father she described as an authoritarian personality through and through, with an arbitrariness in discipline and the delivery of punishment which made life frightening and unpredictable. She described herself in this situation primarily as the victim, but could also see herself as the oppressor who knew how to manipulate the parental division to advantage. She described her way of being in the real world as one of "observer" and "role-player". In terms of this, it is interesting that for her first "role" she chose Miss Magharida who is not detached from her audience, but engages them and is engaged by them in a very living and dynamic way. Thus, within the profession of actress or role player, Michelle chose a role which offered the antithesis of detachment, viz. involvement in the process of creating an evolving process with the active engagement of others.



It was this paradoxical process which ultimately allowed the person - Michelle - through the role of Miss Magharida to differentiate what was intrinsic to her real person and what were peripheral real-life masks or roles. Through the medium of play, she was able to differentiate her inner separateness from those parts of herself embodied in Miss Magharida, i.e. she was able to move beyond the dominance-subordination, oppressor-oppressed split of her real life script to a more whole position.

From a theoretical viewpoint, it is not surprising that playing the role of Miss Magharida, brought growth. Playing this role in the context in which she played it, generated for Michelle many of the characteristics which therapists see as therapeutic, viz. paradox, reality-fantasy, blurring, continuity-discontinuity, questions about inner and outer space, i.e. all the characteristics of a transitional state. Successful negotiation of transitional states, whether in therapy or in the normal growth process or as in this instance in drama is acknowledged by psychodynamics and humanistic therapists as leading to greater integration and health.

Moving from the theoretical to the purely human, when one considers this episode in the life of Michelle, it is again not surprising that it brought a greater wholeness. The courage to affirm oneself in the face of discouraging realities must in itself promote inner development. In this regard, perhaps it is significant that Michelle's next role is as a dancer in a vibrant musical - through the impasse into joy.