

# Labels are for Jars not people!

## An Integrative Approach to Drama as Therapy

Jim Rymer

### **In the beginning:**

It's a wet night, and I am parked up on the A47 in one of those desolate places where there's no sign of life, not even recent road kill to reassure you, you are not alone. The group will be gathering, hot tea will be brewing, biscuits laughter and conversation will abound in plentiful supply and I am stuck here in the middle of nowhere in a car that has done this to me once to often. I suppose it gives me time to think, to reflect upon how I have come to this point.

When I graduated from drama school in Dublin in the early nineties, I had no idea about Humanistic Psychology. The several years previously spent in a Catholic seminary were becoming a blur, gone up like the engine of my car in holey smoke! I just wanted to put on good plays and maybe make a living out of theatre. I set up a theatre company called Painted Horse Theatre now Beyond Image Productions. Even then I guess we were different, the way we cast for one thing, usually the artistic director is the one who has the say in these matters, but I like to gather those I trust around me. To this day we work in a similar way, together we run a series of workshops, designed to stretch both the established actors and the potential new comers. This I believe gives the group ownership of the work. The workshops are the responsibility of the whole group not just me and my ideas, I have as much input as any other, no more and no less, this I feel encourages an authentic response from those auditioning. Fast forward ten years, by then my young family and myself, had moved to England. It was on a similar wet night, just after moving here that I was let down by a different car, on an equally desolate road and I mused on the need to integrate my past experiences, and perhaps get a new car.

I knew that becoming a therapist was something that interested me, I had studied several therapeutic approaches in my seminary days, but that was a long time ago.



The question began to form, how could I merge therapy with my drama experience? I eventually found Matrix School of Counselling and Psychotherapy. It was here that I was given the encouragement and space to explore using drama therapeutic approaches in my counselling. There is very little in therapeutic literature about Integrative drama as therapy. What does exist focuses on the use of various drama techniques and how these may be integrated into the therapy session. My approach over the years has been to first build an integrative therapeutic frame, a scaffold which then supports the various drama therapeutic interventions I may wish to use.

Drama as therapy has its roots in the ancient civilisation of the Greeks; it was Aristotle in Poetics who recognised the value and importance of the 'Cathartic effect', upon their societies ill. I offer integrative drama as therapy to a group of twelve long term and enduring mental health residential clients. Sessions take place once a week for an hour and a half. Prior to the group starting each week I spend a half an hour talking with the community manager and staff about any issues that the clients have presented with during the week. After the group I spend another half an hour de-briefing with the students. Usually there are two trainee mental health nurses as well as a qualified member of the residential staff in attendance. I welcome students and staff alike who show an interest in the process of therapy through drama, these people become my extra eyes and ears, I have learned to trust and appreciate their insight. The staff are part of the therapeutic community as well as the clients, a fact that is often ignored or overlooked.

Working within a mental health setting poses some interesting problems with regard to setting up a therapy group using drama. What unites this group of diverse people with different social backgrounds, experiences, expectations and ideologies? In attempting to answer this I am reminded of one of the mantras the group have adopted 'labels are for jars not people', while an important diagnostic aid to our understanding of a complaint, labels often offer a barrier to the understanding of

the person behind the label. The label rather than the person becomes the focus, a condition rather than a person, that needs to be treated, unravelled and understood. What of the person? Often after years of this treatment they are lulled into seeing themselves as only a label, how often has a client introduced themselves to me as a psychotic or an alcoholic before even telling me their names, a dehumanising process for all involved. What saddens me is that it is an expectation to be treated in this way, I have even had a client argue with me that his diagnosis was more important than his name, it 'defined who I am and how the world sees me', he said, 'it allowed the world to interact with him in a predicted way', he had grown to expect this treatment, after all for him it was safer than just being John.



Jim Rymer

One danger for the group is falling into a comfortable pattern. Why does the group exist or what is it for; become fundamental questions, Questions which are potentially dynamite. I respond by saying that for me the therapeutic community exists to find its own solutions to the problems it confronts. For my part I believe that integrative drama as therapy can offer a way of making sense of the world to both the individual and the group. My belief is that therapeutic dramatic interventions have a solid integrative base which incorporate and harmonise through dramatic structures the Humanistic, Psychoanalytical and Cognitive behavioural fields.

### **A solid base, laying the foundations of integrative drama as therapy;**

'Bowlby was among the first to recognise that the human infant enters the world predisposed to participate in social interaction.' This is an important starting point for drama as therapy; we are beings who seek to create meaning through relationship. Therefore it is through our interaction with others that we make sense of the world and can grow and interact with the world. I am reminded by my clients thought our sessions of their experiences of the frailty of these connecting cords of communication, how at risk they are of fraying or breaking altogether. My work seeks to explore the phenomena of creating and maintaining symbolic meaning through our social interaction, giving voice to the unsaid and the unspeakable, giving form to that, which tears at the very fabric of our being, haunts our waking moments and denies us the right to be ourselves.

So a good starting point is to examine the way in which we make, maintain and promote healthy attachment, 'Existential philosophers like Martin Heidegger have asserted that human existence is not an object –like thing in the way that a table or a molecule is, but an ever –changing flux of experiencing'. It is in this experience that the therapist and client meet the inter-subjective realities. All well and fine but a session can go both ways. Sometimes, it is far from a meeting with clients vying for attention, or dominance, within the group, often as not it is a quibble over when the fag break should be, or a prolonged silence while we wait for who has the strength and courage to reach out and break a group impasse. All these things are grit for the therapeutic wheel. This the reality of working in this medium but having said that we keep our eye on the prize seeking out these 'moments of meeting' by working at a level where to quote the playwright Brian Friel, 'Words are no longer necessary'.

Drama as a form of therapy is not a talking cure (it is a doing cure) Theorists of the theatre talk about 'dexis', from the Greek word meaning to bring to light, to point out. They relate it to 'ostension', the showing or display, which is essential to theatre. They emphasise that 'together 'dexis' and 'ostension', have a quite crucial fundamental function in drama'. They are what distinguish dramatic performance from narrative. I ascertain that it is the quality of pointing to and then displaying through acting out in the guise of character; that marks drama as therapy apart from talking cures. For in talking cures we stay within the 'dexis' but leave out the 'ostension'.

Therapeutic dramatic engagement aims to meet someone at depth which requires receptivity to them as well as an expressivity. 'One of the fundamental tenants of person centred counselling is that our behaviour is to a large extent an acting out of the way we feel about ourselves and the world.' Drama as therapy offers the client a way of integrating Rogers Core conditions of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. Drama teaches us the client and therapist, these skills through awareness of self and mindfulness of others. Drama is the form of art in which empathy is most easily understood; 'Empathy is a continuing process whereby the counsellor lays aside her own way of experiencing and perceiving reality, preferring to sense and respond to the experiences and perceptions of the client'. Bowlby was himself impressed by symbolic acts of communication, where better to begin our journey then, than to find and explore such symbolic acts than in the drama of life.

In the development of drama as therapy, I am seeking not to re-establish a missing connection within the client surrounding his or her attachment object but rather to recreate and arouse to consciousness the dormant feelings surrounding the attachment loss, and in so doing provide possible avenues of exploration and new

opportunities of forging out of the old patterns more appropriate attachment bonds. For this to occur I focus on a humanistic approach and look at the whole person, not just the presenting problem. The clients I work with have a complex emotional and psychological tapestry, by using a creative medium I endeavour to help the group explore what is often left unsaid in human encounters. This exploration is not mystical it is often a painfully fought and a physically exhausting affair for all involved. I am blessed with a very brilliant art therapist as my supervisor, and humanistic counsellor for those times when I need to dip into the well of mental wellbeing.

The dramatic encounter offers the opportunity for our emotions to play out upon the therapeutic stage. It is through this encounter of another, in role, that emotions seep into consciousness and we come into contact with experiences that have been split off from our awareness, these present themselves in the here and now relationship of the therapeutic encounter. It is through the drama of enactment that we come into closer contact with these cut off rejected parts of the self and reclaim full contact with the split self. It is through the exploration of the client's imagination that we come to understand in an in-depth way the reality of the client's world. 'Acting out has been defined by Rycroft (1968) as 'the replacement of thought by action.'

'Psychoanalytic theory teaches that once of the costs of repressing an important need is that the need does not become integrated into the developing personality. The need is walled off from the ego, and because the ego is the part of the personality that orchestrates integration and appropriate maturation, the need remains in its primitive form'. Drama as therapy is able to enter this primitive state of being by circumventing the rational, and create 'Brooks' sacred 'Empty space where anything can happen'. It is through the therapeutic relationship within this empty potential space that the client enters into the world of the unconscious, which speaks to us in Jungian archetypes and symbol, the language of dramatic metaphor, the mother tongue of drama. Jung's work gave credence to the use of art as a means by which the client could become an object to himself.

### **A group session with a magic balloon of led.**

In a session the group were exploring the theme of oppression. One of the clients I noticed had created an imaginary object. As the work progressed I noticed that he was struggling to keep down this object, using all his body force and mental energy in holding it below waist level. I also noticed that he was isolated from the main group as if this exertion alienated him from others, his struggle was his alone and the group was not going to interfere with this process. I drew closer to him and asked if I could

help him hold down his burden, mirroring this activity, during this I commented to him how exhausting it was on my body, we toiled on, both becoming more exhausted and wrung out engaging in this mighty struggle to hold down his inner oppression. Then a remarkable thing happened, we were approached by another client June an elective mute, without warning she began to take the heavy object and transform its weight into a lighter thing, up the object began to float we three held on to an 'obvious imaginary string', but we were there working together. This transformation encouraged others to join in and soon we as a group were shouldering our part of this burden, working to relieve the oppression that we all shared, the object had transformed into a symbol for group oppression.

The silent client June asked Peter what the object was, 'it's a lead balloon of course', Came the reply, it's been inside for years but doesn't it fly beautifully? 'I'm not ready to let it go just yet,' he said to me , 'But at least its not pushing against my heart anymore, if it stayed there any longer there would have been no more room for love... or any feeling.'

The symbolic nature of drama as therapy needs to be examined in relation to our philosophical grounding of drama as therapy. 'The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is found in the 'You'. Wholeness is a combination of 'I' and 'You', and these show themselves to be parts of a transcendent unity whose nature can only be grasped symbolically.' Jung viewed the artistic experience or what he called 'active imagination', as having both a diagnostic and therapeutic function. The creative act evokes material that is available for analysis and is at the same time cathartic. By virtue of the non-literal or apparently non-rational aspects of the creative art, deep feelings that defy words can be symbolically represented. 'If there were an act in life in which the individual could attain unity in self and thus transcend the guilt feeling, it would be an act of pure creativity'.

### **Discovering a place where Freud and Jung can hold hands.**

An important link with Freud's teaching and drama as therapy is that of the primary law of the unconscious, that which is repressed seeks expression, one of the primary laws of the ego is that which is repressed is denied expression. 'Change is the business of psychotherapy and therapeutic change must express itself in action, not knowing intending or dreaming' The mind comes to a compromise of acting out the memory through symbolic action which may take many forms and be manifested as we have seen in the example above in many ways. 'The realm of primary process contains the

raw material for our poetry, our creativity and our playfulness, the artist is one who can explore the realm of primary process and then make an artistic unity out of what is found there'. It is also interesting to note that in this realm of primary process the wish is equivalent to the deed.

Within the drama group the individual is given the opportunity to re-experience in a safe environment the realm of primary process, it is the 'empty space', which enables these images to be represented at different levels. 'It is within this therapeutic empty space that lives are re-created and re-presented in symbolic form'. Drama as therapy aids the transformation of the *symbolic image* into *symbolic experience*. Therefore we can now begin to understand that the drama while coming out of symbolic chaos is both the container of the chaos and the means of exploring it. The job of the therapist is to stay with the chaos and allow the meaning to emerge from it. This is a difficult task and demands that we approach the content of the symbolic chaos with a humanistic/existentialist view, for we are dealing with the meaning of life itself. Drama as therapy aims to encourage the client to come to 'the belief that self reliance and self responsibility are necessary for growth'. Both I note as tenants of Humanistic psychology. This is by no means an easy option, for client or therapist, as it requires the involvement of the whole person, body, mind and soul to aid a therapeutic outcome.

### **A place where words are no longer necessary;**

Using drama as therapy offers a merging of philosophical ideas between an integrative and humanistic approach, for to my mind the humanistic offers a unique view of the individual. It is through dramatic engagement, using metaphor, symbolic acts as well as rites of passage that we bring into focus the humanistic way of entering into and engaging with the world. It is through the dramatic life of the group that the individual finds and secures a voice for themselves. Learning to re-engage with life and find personal meaning within a supportive and challenging environment.

At its heart drama as therapy seeks to move the individual from an everyday state of mind to an ontological state, a state of being in which we are aware of being, in this state change is more possible. For, 'when we exist in the ontological mode, the realm of beyond everyday concerns, we are in a state of particular readiness for personal change.' One of the ways we achieve this is the establishment of rituals and rites of passage. The session itself with its pattern of 'check in' time, at the beginning and 'reflection time', at the end cushioning the main body of the work in the middle becomes a ritual, and for many in the group a way of marking moments of growth

or difficulty in the week. The very fact that the group happens on the same day at the same time each week anchors those residents for whom time is like quicksilver, ever evasive. Often my clients will express their frustration, and internal stagnation in terms of boredom, boredom with the daily routine and from time to time with the group or certain members of the group (my self included) and the seemingly predictable way members have of reacting or responding to the challenge of change. As a therapist it is sometimes hard not to try to fill in the gap, to breach the silence with a suitable soliloquy, hard not to become the performer. It can be very difficult to sit with the transference, and the palpable tension of other peoples disquiet. The boredom becomes a nemesis for the clients.

The joy about integrative drama as therapy is that it offers the opportunity to act out the transference to speak as it were from that place within the boredom. From this, 'acting out', we are able to move from the position of the fixed Gestalt. 'Transference and counter- transference are about theatre. There is a gap between actor and audience which makes projection possible'. We come to the realisation that it is our reaction to internal states that creates the feeling of helplessness and repressed anger toward our state, manifested by way of in-action and stagnation, and we label this boredom. Role play is central to development of an approach to integrative drama as therapy. In many ways we integrate many role plays within our daily life. I am at different times a father, a teacher, a therapist, a friend, a son, a lover, an adversary and an advocate. Role play shapes who we are and where we stand in the world. Therapeutic drama allows us to step into role and play out our fantasies in a safe place, it acts as a container for unmet desires and forgotten wishes, it is the fertile ground of aspirations, it acts as a corrective mirror to distortions, negative self image, and self loathing. In this world anything is possible.

Gill believed that remembering though was not enough, what is missing is re-experiencing. Therapeutic drama offers the client the opportunity to engage with the process of re-experiencing through re-enactment, thus the client is an active rather than a passive recipient of the experience of re-experiencing. 'While it is necessary for clients to understand the roots of their difficulties that understanding cannot be merely delivered as an explanation. It must emerge as clients re-experience certain aspects of their past. And this re-experiencing must occur within the therapeutic relationship.' The danger is to force the client into an enactment as themselves and thus open them up to re-traumatising themselves. Drama as therapy allows the client to enter their re-enactment at whatever point they wish, offering them different perspectives on the event. The therapist also puts in place various escape clauses or strategies, the mantle of a character once removed from the action aids



this process. Giving the clients implements to ward off evil, a shield and sword imbued with magic power, and a cloak of invisibility are techniques which I have used in the past. Clients are able to use the third person or narrator to speak about the traumatic event rather than recount it first hand which may be to close and re-traumatising for them. At the end of the day clients can de-role and divest themselves of the character.

### **The bafflement of paradox.**

‘Healthy existence is that ever elusive rhythmic balance of separateness and relatedness’. So the very act of drama involves us in the act of integrating these various strands into a unifying hole. ‘Psychotherapy is about integration, integration of awareness of internal and external sensations, integration of thinking and feeling, integration of taking the world into oneself and of putting one self into the world’ Imagination and fantasy involves and depends upon the interaction of both conscious and unconscious processes, and so carries both emotional urgency as well as cognitive function. Dramatic imagination is dependant upon the client’s capacity to bear the conflict and bafflement of paradox, for the transitional object (the dramatic ‘empty space’/ the group) possesses the quality of a paradox in that it is separate from the self and distinct, while also being fused and in relation. The therapist helps the client to take part in his or her own experience. ‘Little by little the client lifts himself or herself from the primal darkness into consciousness and further, possible remedial action’. Kohut believed that higher aspects of the personality- humour, empathy, creativity and wisdom –come from a successfully internalised experience of an idealised parental imago. ‘If this need is not adequately met children are in danger of feeling in some way that they are not like other people that they don’t fit in’. Drama allows clients to fully experience these unmet needs and fully express these in order to complete the healthy development of the self and go on to more mature gratification.

Humanistic psychology offers those who have trained and followed an integrative mode of thinking a new and exciting way of accepting the client’s world, of entering into the reality of that world on the client’s grounds, without expectation or demand. Through using drama as therapy the client and can learn to place their historic label where it truly belongs on a jar not a person.

## A post script

As I write this on my laptop the rain has stopped outside, the light from the moon has illuminated the road to the group, and the engine has cooled off enough to try again. I still drive a dodgy car through the back roads of Norfolk so spare a thought if you see me in a lay-by.

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