

T.G. Thomas

BRICKWALLS AND BELLIES

A recollection of a session in my training group.

I climb up the stairs because the lift isn't working. I'm first. The lift doesn't work and the corridors are pitch black because there's a power cut. I'm always first. I am feeling first, wishing I was third or fourth. I grope my way down the corridor to the little room I know so well. There are a series of photographs of railway stations taken at night on the walls of the psychodrama room. As soon as I'm in there and alone Barbara comes in.

"I hope it's alright", she begins, "I feel sort of apologetic about it. A man I know is on TV tonight. He said he wants me to watch so I promised him I would". Barbara is robust and in her sixties. Sometimes she finds it difficult to lie on the floor, "I'll have to go around a quarter to nine. It's quite a funny play, bit like Terence Rattigan, if you've heard of him?"

"Yes".

"Do you think the group will mind, me going early?"

"Yes".

"Oh, do you really think so?", she laughs, hesitates and goes on, "I'm not at all sure whether I like this Fyson person, do you?"

My eyebrows raise. "In my opinion, he's okay". Her questions embarrass me. Have I heard of Terence Rattigan? Will the group object to her leaving early? Do I like the Group Leader?

Robert comes in. He looks tired. He comes down to London every week from Manchester for this.

"Good evening, Robert. I was just saying to Tim: I don't know about Joe, or maybe its psychodrama".

"You've done sociodrama with Wu, haven't you?", I ask her.

"I don't see the difference between psychodrama and sociodrama/", says Robert.

"Well, anyway", says Barbara, taking off her shoes, "Psychodrama doesn't have anything to do with drama. I mean the sort of drama I know".

Jeanette comes in. A blonde, around forty, she works with disturbed children and has been 'doing groups' for years and years and years. She always looks very relaxed and always denies it. Rick follows close behind her dressed in a green track suit which he strips off with his back to us.

"I just met the man you played for me the week before last, Tim", says Jeanette, "downstairs in the lobby. I hadn't seen him for two years".

"Can I just say", interposes Barbara, "that I don't understand a word you're saying, Jeanette".

"I was saying that the man Tim sculpted is IN THIS BUILDING".

"You remember, Barbara, she put me under the table with my hand over one eye and said I was a negative person".

"Promising things he never came up with"?, says Rick, knowingly.

Jeanette is delighted. "Something like that", she says.

Jeanette has failed to communicate anything but confusion to Barbara. Just as Barbara looks as if she's going to get anxious our psychodrama leader arrives. Robert Fyson is small, pale, grey bearded; he has a high forehead and is carrying a crash helmet. He mutters something under his breath, probably 'hello' and puts the helmet and a plastic bag in the corner. He throws two foam rubber cushions into the centre of the floor and we all throw cushions there too and sit down in a circle.

Barbara says, "hello, Robert". He looks at her, smiles and says hello, then he seems to look at everyone in turn. I nod at him. Robert nods at him. Jeanette changes her position slightly on her cushion, they smile at each other.

"People tend to over-estimate warm-ups", he says.

Sue comes in. She's late, so she is looking for somewhere to fit into the circle immediately she's in the door.

"Don't you mean ~~under~~-estimate?", asks Rick.

Sue has found her place. She begins to retreat from being late.

"Did I say over-estimate, hmm, must have been testing to see how alert you all were".

God Jesus, here's another person coming in late! Portia, I should have remembered, is always five minutes late because the beginning clashes with her psychoanalysis. A strange woman from Hungary, kind of Egyptian looking. This week she is wearing a short tartan skirt and long white stockings. The thing that makes her seem strange to me is that although she's young she looks kind of well-preserved. She avoids sitting in the empty space by Robert and lands between Barbara and Jeanette.

Robert Joe
Barbara Susan
Portia Rick
 Jeanette Tim

"Warm-ups invariably lead to psychodrama", Robert is saying.

Barbara interrupts. "Last week's psychodrama was bad when Rosemary was working". She is staring at and plucking at her jersey.

Rosemary's absence this week seems to confirm a problem the group is having.

"I'd like her to be here", says Jeanette, "I don't like it when someone gets into something one week and doesn't arrive the next. It makes me feel edgy".

"The problem with last week", says Sue, lying head into the circle, legs stretched out behind her, "was that Rosemary was sort of forced to do the psychodrama by you, Rick".

"I didn't force her to do anything. It was bad because there wasn't enough time. She was crying at the end".

"Yeah. Time can be a real problem. What would you do if you were running a group and someone started crying two minutes before the end"?

"Extend the time", Rick says this and sits bolt upright.

"Yes, but maybe on that one day you're free to go on for another half an hour but the following session someone else does the same thing and you have an appointment to keep. One person gets the extra half an hour, someone else is denied it. You have to make the decision as the group leader. Myself, I think special relationships are risky", Robert smiles seriously, "Here you are at the end of the session and someone in the group is worked up. Do you take them to one side? That's making a special relationship, though".

"So what do you do?"

"I think it's a good idea if the person knows they can get in touch with someone from the group in the interval between sessions. You could start by having a bit of telephone number swapping right at the first session".

A sudden silence while the group digests Robert's advice. I am lying on my back with my head out of the circle and my feet in - the exact opposite of Sue. People look at the carpet.

"About last week, Robert", Jeanette breaks in, "I thought Rosemary was giving signals out right through but when it came to work she seemed forced. Jeanette looks worriedly at the group but you can see the composure is right there underneath it although she would deny it if you pointed it out. She sits with her knees tucked under her chin. Another silence. No one is going to pick up on what she just said.

"You know", says Robert, matter of factly, "this group looks very tired".

"I am, I don't know about the rest", replies Rick. "Nothing too energetic this week, please Robert".

"Come on". Robert is standing up. The group follows. We arrange ourselves in a semi circle. A chair is placed facing us from the other side of the room. Robert asks us to imagine each of us is sitting in the chair. He invites us to say a few words to ourselves. We have to address the chair one at a time out loud. I speak last: "come here". I suppose this must mean I feel a long way off from myself.

A violent knocking on the door. Robert jumps slightly and goes out to see what is going on. A woman's voice, half crying, complains that 'they' will not let her in. 'They' are rejecting her. During Robert's prolonged absence this voice on the other side of the door comes over as a soothing hum) we decide on a further round of statements to the multiple being in the chair.

I'm feeling very critical of myself. "You're just a collection of props and crutches". It sounds hollow and false. A feeling of inadequacy surges up in me.

Robert returns. He is careful to tell us what is happening. The woman outside who banged on the door went to a one-day psychodrama group and, because of a language problem - she's Italian -, she assumed she'd been invited to join the introductory group downstairs. They sent her up here.

"It's being sorted out", he says, "now I want you to look at the chair and try to see a colour there". I see grey blotched with red. "Give the colour a shape and give the shape some kind of movement". I am looking at a large grey razor blade, blotched with red, moving in a slow circle.

Pause.

"O.K. Is there anyone here who'd like to work on what's come up for them during this exercise?"

Nick says he wants to work. Who will direct? Sue volunteers.

Sue asks Nick a series of questions about what he saw on the chair. He saw red. He felt angry. The movement was 'going away'. Then he began to see his girlfriend going away. What is she like? She's a psychotherapist with two children. Sue sits him in the chair and puts another, empty chair, facing him.

"Why do you feel angry?"

"I'm angry because she doesn't have time for me".

"Is there anyone here who reminds you of her?"

"Yes. Tim does".

I remind Nick of his girl friend. I get up slowly, concentrating on the patterns on the carpet, feeling heavy, my hands seem to hang down heavily. I look at Portia. She smiles at me. She is a member of the European Psychological Association. I sit down in the empty chair opposite Rick, Sue at my shoulder staring first at him, then at me. I feel good about Sue directing. I like her. I look at Rick, this is not going to be too difficult but it won't be deep either. I'll try to keep it moderate. My mind does a comforting closure on all the possible motives he may have for casting me as his girl friend.

"What's her name?", Sue asks.

"Jenny".

"How would she be sitting if she were here with us?"

She would have had her hands on her lap with one palm lying on the back of the other hand and her legs crossed. This is so effeminate a position for me that, when I do it, the group laughs. I wonder what Rick is saying in all this. Don't think, act. He starts to talk to me as if I were she.

"You're not being straight with me. You're too busy. I know you want me to stay. I want you to ask me to stay".

"I've told you", I reply, "I can't make up my mind whether I want you to stay or to go".

"That's exactly what I mean. You're not being straight".

Robert comes in just as Sue is reversing our roles. We change chairs. I assume Rick's position (leaning back, hands on hips) and he gets into his girl friend ... quite a different posture from the way I did it and using a Scottish accent which he never told me about and which doesn't quite work.

"Go on, Rick", he says to me, "get out".

I can't reply. I look at Sue. She reverses us back. We change chairs. I decide not to pick up on the accent - my attempt would be even worse than his but I want him to hear me tell him to get out, since he's just told me to.

"Why don't you go, Rick? We're not doing each other any good".

"You invited yourself into this psychodrama group, Jenny", he replies, "it's up to you to go. I'm staying".

We seem to have moved in space/time from her flat **then** to this room **now**.

I stand up. Yes, I'm going to go. I don't really want to. I'd prefer to sit around arguing with him all evening. Standing up, however, also constitutes a threat. Sue tells me to sit down. I sit down. Robert interrupts us by asking Sue if she knows where she'll be with this psychodrama in five minutes time. She says she knows but she mixes this with a self-deprecating laugh.

"Look, Ricky", I say, crossing my legs and looking sincere, "You're too young. You don't want to believe I don't want you. You're banging your head against a brick wall".

"Yes", he shouts, "and the brick wall is your belly".

Sue asks him to repeat this phrase. He shrugs. He can't remember what he said.

"What did you say?", I ask.

"Belly . . . against your belly . . . it's just a phrase".

"Besides", I stab into the unknown, "I don't think my friends will accept you. It's your age".

"That's crap. That's bullshit".

"And there's the kids. You're uneasy with the kids".

He laughs. "O.K., I'll go. But I want my things back".

"Now you're just being bitchy".

"No".

"What **things** do you want back?"

"The photographs of me. You have some photographs of me. And an article I wrote".

"You can have the photos. But I'd like to keep the article. I haven't finished reading it yet".

"No. I want them both back. Now".

Jeanette appears behind me, to 'double' me.

"I'm hurt, I'm hurt", she says for me.

"Give me my things", he demands.

"Alright. I have them here. I brought them to this psychodrama group, funnily enough". I get up, noticing how much lighter I feel, and walk behind Rick to my coat. I pretend to fish out the photos. I put them into his outstretched hand. "Here they are". I hope he'll remember I haven't given him back his article but he doesn't seem to - instead he's miming looking at the photos of himself.

"Now you've got your things back, may I go?"

"Yes, go on. Piss off".

I stand up again. Sue closes the psychodrama there. That seems right. There's not going to be a catharsis. It seems to have been some preliminary sparring between him and me but I'm confused as to why he cast me as his girl friend.

We form a circle for the feedback. Everyone is anxious to know how Rick is feeling. He says he still feels angry. He looks pale. Portia says something about an affair she had - 'he finished with me just as I was going to begin'.

Nick says, "I can't seem to get the woman out of my head".

I tell him I'm having the same trouble myself. "It makes me feel frigid". The word 'frigid' sets off a strange noise in Jeanette's throat which turns into a rapid tale about a Frenchman from Bordeaux which Barbara says she cannot understand. The Frenchman from Bordeaux is difficult to understand, Jeanette admits laughing, and then she says **she** was confused by Rick's psychodrama.

She addresses her remarks to Robert, not Rick. "Rick seemed to have a sarcastic grin on his face right the way through", she says.

Joe has taken a few notes. He doesn't talk to the protagonist but is keen to get his comments over to the director and the double as well as to me. He 'liked' what I did but says there was too much anger in it and not enough 'hurt'.

He turns to Jeanette. "So what you said when you doubled for Tim was just right". He talks about people who find it difficult to express their feelings, sighting examples: a man unable to be angry, a woman whose father never allowed her to say how she was feeling when she was a child and another woman who had to be in a state of terror before she could feel anything at all.

"Right. Competently directed, Sue, without too much anxiety although I wondered if you had a really clear idea of what you wanted to do. Directors have to pick up clues but they must be clear about moving the action and the feelings along. I'd like to ask the group one thing now. WHO DO YOU THINK IS FEELING MOST AT THIS MOMENT?"

There are no immediate replies. I suddenly feel hurt about something. I'm slowly sinking away down into my pain, away from the performance aspect. Noel looks even more tired now than he did when he arrived and all he's done is watch. Jeanette is checking with her hand to see if her skirt's down low enough. Portia's white stocking are the only things I can see about her from where I'm sitting. Sexual desire wells up in me over the pain-from-nowhere I feel. Barbara is putting on her shoes.

"Look, I'm frightfully sorry about this but I really must get home to see the play on telly. I promised. Sorry".

Robert does not respond to this at all and Barbara is left standing above the group, bewildered, uncertain. It's nearly time for the group to end anyway so her hurry is a little absurd.

"By 'feeling most'", continues Robert as Barbara sits down again, "I mean feeling really strongly. Who do you think it is in the group at this moment?"

Sue and I look at each other and look away and Robert says, "Rick".

Barbara stands up again. Robert gets ready to move. "O.K.", he says, "thank you". I put on my jacket. Rick and I avoid each other. Portia goes over and puts her arm round his waist, Jeanette's hand is already touching his shoulder. I turn sharply and leave. This night I say 'goodbye' to no one and no one says 'goodbye' to me.
