

ACTING AS THERAPY FOR PERSONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT?

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Abstract

For centuries gone, man has been constantly involved in acting/playing either knowingly or not. This somehow entertaining/pleasurable and spontaneous activity combines functions beyond its simplistic nature. In this light, entertainment, information, education and therapy are usually combined in a single activity in which partakers seek common outcomes. It however remains unclear how acting can be used as a therapeutic activity for personal and social development. This article addresses these perspectives through an exploratory approach of some practical considerations, to show that acting is, can, and should be used for personal and social development of persons in different contexts. It comes out of the study that acting is a form of language that facilitates expression or communication in the therapeutic space and gives the participants the possibility to understand their situations and interact better with the context. When participants involve in acting/playing, they are given the possibility to express themselves, develop their creative skills, interrelate, interact and use their imagination to dramatize situations.

Keywords: *acting; therapy; personal and social development*

Introduction

For many years, acting has been used as a process to engage participants to become more aware of health problems and wellbeing. Termed theatrical acting, it is an activity with intense pleasure that allows the participant to discover unsuspected potentials that have been inhibited for long. It is learning how to explore different states of mind, the nuances of the whole palette of human feelings. By its very history and its device, acting can offer qualities of openness to the world, imagination and appetite for communication. Through acting, theatre becomes a complete art form because it involves the body, voice, soul and space in a collective device.

In a therapeutic area, acting helps to develop self-confidence and to assert self-expression. For this reason, theatre is considered as a form of expression wherein the body, space, words, and situations are explored in a playful manner for therapeutic purposes. Based on this premise, it is considered that the use of acting in formal therapeutic settings was born

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from Vladimir Iljine (Jones 1996) though this can be argued since the notion of therapeutic theatre based on play, can be traced back to African and Greek performances which existed long before Iljine. Despite Iljine's first modernisation attempts, it was Moreno (1889-1974) who, a few years later, formalized the practice. Influenced by Stanislavski, Moreno is at the origin of the practices and terms like "psychodrama", "sociometry", "group psychotherapy", and "theatre of spontaneity" (Kellerman 1992 and Bannister 1997).

In a therapeutic space according to Didier Anzieu (1975, p.53), the theatrical acting allows the actor/participant to abandon all learning of a pre-established text and any search for an effect on the public, to act his own character or a fictional character whose result is on his own account, so that he can better understand himself and make himself better understood by those with whom he lives or works, where he agrees to change at the same time as knowing who he is. From this point of view, it is noted that the challenge of linking "therapy and theatre" goes beyond the possible use of theatre in therapeutic practices. It is about the very use of theatre as a therapeutic process. The theatre acting in this case uses psychological mechanisms capable of impacting personality and operating in its transformations. The case is even more appalling when it comes to working with participants in a precise context. Working in a community setting, following improvisational methods of performance, acting can carry participants into a therapeutic journey whose results will contribute to personal and social development. A number of questions can be asked to better understand the issue of acting as therapy for personal and social development.

What is acting and what is its relationship with therapy? How is a therapeutic performance conceived, structured and performed? How do participants undergo the personal and social development processes? These questions, formulated in their broadest sense, would direct reflections to return to the old debate on catharsis (of which we know the medical etymology) in the theatre. Without seeking to dig deep into this debate, the aim here is to highlight the issues and perspectives of acting as therapy. A theoretical exploration of the various methodologies of applications will help situate acting as vital in addressing social and personal development issues.

I- Definition of key concepts

1. Acting (le Jeu)/Playing

The notion of acting/playing is wide and has varied implications attributed to it. It goes without doubt that acting/playing is one of the most meaningful aspects of human life from childhood. This is because playful activities are essential for development, permit the adaptation to new situations and can help someone to maintain and/or improve health (therapy). It provides pleasure, relaxation, and favours spontaneity. In this light, it can be considered as any activity in which participants spontaneously engage and find pleasure (Vessey and Mahon, 1990).

Play can be classified as a form of recreation, entertainment and distraction; stimulation towards the development of cognitive, social, creative, sensorimotor skills; socialisation in the society; and as a therapeutic or cathartic instrument. Used in relation to theatrical play, therapeutic play is a notion that refers to specialised activities that are developmentally supportive and facilitate the emotional wellbeing of participants. It is a form of language that facilitates expression or communication in the therapeutic space that is created. Play gives the participants the possibility to understand their situations and interact better with the context. When participants involve in play, they are given the possibility to express themselves, develop their creative skills, interrelate, interact and use their imagination to dramatize situations.

Imagination and improvisation are vital in theatrical play development. As such, when involved in activities of dramatization or theatricalisation, participants are in no way, mechanically imitating or reproducing situations. They are rather engaged in activities of imagination and improvisation wherein they actively and immediately reshape the communication they are producing and receiving, thoroughly transforming them in a manner that tends to invalidate the idea of a neutral encoded message being decoded by a receiver. By this, I argue that the participants in theatrical play are not simply involved in the decoding process but in a somewhat making or re-making of communication through improvisation. This implies, participants need to have a particular focus or objective when embarking on a therapeutic journey. The conditions in which the participants are, will cause them to set particular objectives which they intend to achieve

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through playmaking. The use of play here permits the relief of the anxiety caused by their various psycho-social conditions. The results of this intervention are therapeutic.

2. Therapy

Therapy according to Jones is a “form of intervention aimed at bringing about personal change” (1996, 2007). It involves change towards a greater integration where there is currently fragmentation. It can as well be considered as an attempted remediation of a health problem, usually following a diagnosis. Therapy can also be considered synonymous to psychotherapy which is a process of meeting with a therapist for the purpose of resolving a problematic behaviour, belief, feeling, and/or somatic responses (Rubinstein 2013). It can as well be considered as becoming involved in a relationship which might become healing. Therapy can allow the self and relationships to become more whole, less a set of fragments. Understood as such, therapy can be applied in many cases considered under the curative, liberating, or social aspects of a human being. This implies, a therapy can cure, liberate or change behaviour and beliefs.

3. Curative therapy

In the curative form of therapy, a psychiatric nurse or psychiatrist is needed to make medical prescriptions for the patient to follow in order to be cured. In the medical field, it is synonymous with the word ‘treatment’. In the course of treatment, what the therapist requires is for the therapy to have a therapeutic effect on the client or patient.

Feelings of fear for instance, can be handled in therapy. When fear is temporary, it can be an ally, but when it takes over, it can interfere with the peace and happiness of an individual. Fear is a normal and natural part of life without which our chances of survival would be greatly diminished. However, when fears are irrational, persistent, or intense, our level of happiness and ability to function can be compromised. In this case, fear signifies a threat to our wellbeing and thus, needs an action.

4. Liberating Therapy

In other cases, one can be afraid when really, there is nothing to be afraid of, though this irrational fear may in effect, be covering over a deeper fear which requires that we should

discover and examine in a therapy session. In a like manner, phobias which are terrifying and debilitating, can be overcome through the work of therapy. When this is done, the individual feels liberated of fear thereby freeing the body, mind and emotions. Therapy in this case is a form of liberation (Martinez 2012).

5. Preventive Therapy

Therapy can also be used in cases of social exclusion. Individuals who feel excluded from their families and community can develop depressive symptoms. The case of HIV/AIDS patients is just one example. In most communities in the developing world in general and in Cameroon in particular, when a person is diagnosed of HIV/AIDS, it becomes life-altering and frightening. He struggles with depression and anxiety. He experiences an overwhelming stress due to the financial demands and lifestyle changes required in treatment. Because it is difficult to single-handedly pursue treatment, family members are expected to contribute in one way or the other. The expected assistance from families rarely comes and patients are abandoned by their peers. Like a wild fire, the news spreads in the entire community and everybody becomes aware of the victim's status. Thence comes segregation and stigmatisation, a superhighway to depression and other mental health problems (Minya L'akoa et al., 2013). These individuals need the services of therapy which can help them cope with grief, trauma, depression, and anxiety. Engaging in an expressive/creative therapy like theatre, permits them to develop coping mechanisms to ease stress and avoid depression and other related psychological pathologies. This is a preventive therapy modality which avoids the outburst of bigger mental health concerns.

Therapy involves change and relationship which is the planned application of drama/theatre techniques. Though the use of theatre in Western countries in the first half of the twentieth century was reserved as a "recreation, as an adjunct to the main therapeutic ways of working with people in care or health settings", Jones affirms that "a change has come to be fully acknowledged: that the drama itself is the therapy" (Jones 1996, 2007) in recent years. This implies drama/theatre does not serve the therapy. The drama/theatre process contains the therapy.

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According to Oatley (1984), therapy is defined as becoming involved in a relationship which might become healing. “It can allow the self and relationships to become more whole, less a set of fragments ...” Jones further quotes Irwin who defines therapy in similar terms of change and relationship. These relations in theatre “aid in remediation [sic], rehabilitation, or personal or social adjustment” and serve as “a specific form of intervention to bring about intrapsychic, interpersonal, or behavioural changes” (Irwin 1979). This definition of therapy is considered important to the understanding of the context in which theatre is applied in this here as having therapeutic qualities. Worth highlighting in this definition is the use of theatre to aid social adjustments and bring about interpersonal and behavioural changes or development. It is more in this direction that the application of theatrical processes provides an opportunity for healing and change. This takes place within a therapeutic framework.

In this process, theatrical processes are worked with in ways which according to Jones “facilitate therapeutic change”. These are ways, inherent in the theatre. This does not imply all theatre is therapy or therapeutic. Theatre achieves its effects through a development and use of therapeutic aspects, utilised within a clear therapeutic relationship of social adjustment and inter-personal change. It can hereby be said that theatre has a therapeutic function.

II- Therapeutic function of theatre

Healing through theatre is ancient and observable in rituals and rites which themselves are older than theatre in its modern conception. Stephen Snow, Miranda D’Amico and Denise Tanguay (2003) seem to be of this same view. To them, “there is an innate healing function in theatre that goes all the way back to its origins in human culture” (p.73). This is so because theatre is the art form closest to life, an “imitation” of life. Snow et al. further consider theatre to be a “celebration of life in all its light and darkness, and ... the art of theatre, per se, can be shaped into a powerful vehicle for therapy that positively effects psychological well-being”.

From another perspective, the therapeutic function of theatre can be seen in Jerzy Grotowski’s first statement of principles:

Theatre – through the actor’s technique, his art in which the living organism strives for higher motives – provided an opportunity for what could be called integration, the discarding of masks, the revealing of the real substance: a totality of physical and mental reactions. This opportunity must be treated in a disciplined manner, with a full awareness of the responsibilities it involves. Here we can see the theatre’s therapeutic function for people in our present day civilisation. It is true that the actor accomplished this act, but he can only do so through an encounter with the spectator – intimately, visibly, not hiding behind a cameraman, wardrobe mistress, stage designer or make-up girl – in direct confrontation with him, and somehow “instead of” him. The actor’s act – discarding half measures, revealing, opening up, emerging from himself as opposed to closing up – is an invitation to the spectator. This act could be compared to an act of the most deeply rooted, genuine love between two human beings – this is just a comparison since we can only refer to this “emergence from oneself” through analogy. This act, paradoxical and borderline, we call a total act. In our opinion it epitomises the actor’s deepest calling. (Grotowski & Barba 2002)

From these views, theatre is seen to present a platform on which man is confronted with himself. This permits fears, falsehood, and other conflicting situations to be put on stage in an intimate relationship between the actor and the audience. The effects of theatre on the actor are complete when the actor’s act involves the audience. This interaction between the actor and the viewer is central to the understanding of the general notion of “therapeutic theatre” which I will examine later. According to Walsh (2013), “as we observe lives play out before us as spectators, or actively collaborate in the process as performers, practitioners and participants, theatre can illuminate and stimulate mental and emotional activity, those primary targets of therapeutic intervention”. This relates theatre to a collective process of change and can be linked with catharsis seen as a process of identification with the hero of a play. Catharsis employed in this case intends to purify and purge emotions through art or to evoke a change in emotions that results in renewal and restoration. It is traced from Aristotle who, in the *Poetics* used catharsis to describe the effects of tragedy on the spectator. From the *Poetics* though, there is no clear definition of what Aristotle meant by catharsis and this has allowed theories and definitions emanating from theorists to be different and sometimes contrasting.

Cathartic feelings in a theatre are experienced empathetically for the characters in a play by the audience. Empathy is “the feeling of ‘belonging to’, associating ourselves with, or ‘being carried along’ with something”. It is also the “capacity to vicariously experience and understand the thoughts and feelings of another person by putting oneself in that

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person's place". This theatrical or cathartic experience is shared by the entire audience and by so doing, magnifying release and allowing for an adjustment or change in the entire community's attitude as a whole.

According to Thomas Scheff (1979), catharsis is also likely to be derived from other forms of artistic manifestation than tragedy as held by Aristotle. Scheff's attribution of catharsis to other artistic forms is of interest to me as it opens possibilities in which cathartic effects or affects can be observed. These effects and affects are what therapeutic theatre achieves on the audience/participants. Catharsis in therapeutic theatre therefore is not unidirectional but bidirectional because it touches both the viewers and the doers.

Through theatre, participants act out things which they cannot express in words or which they are not free to express. The therapeutic function of theatre in this case is 'abreaction' which can include events experienced in the past and these can be symbolically retraced and transformed through improvisation, thus making it possible to rewrite and transform the script of the past and change the details regarding behaviour and emotional nuances more than once. When theatre carries these effects, it is said to be therapeutic but not therapy. Therapeutic hereby refers to that which works while therapy is a well designed treatment modality presupposing diagnosis of a problem.

When participants are involved in acting, they are in a way exploring themselves through a game of role play and feelings using the interpretation of real or fictional stories. The therapeutic function in this case is that of allowing the full expression and realisation of oneself, overcoming prejudices and stereotypes. Theatre hereby has a therapeutic function in personal and interpersonal development, and also social adjustments of the participants who partake in the process.

III- Therapeutic theatre

While Minet holds that therapeutic theatre is "an access to the exploration of the unconscious, the expression of suffering, the experience of relation and incites to become what we are, that is, self, nothing but self, but all self while being some other, during the time of a scene" (2006, p.19), Andersen-Warren and Grainger believe that "dramatherapy [considered synonymous to therapeutic theatre] means the therapy that is in drama itself

– all drama – and not merely the use of some aspects of drama as therapeutic tools. This is its uniqueness. It is not simply role-reversal, effective though this may be, or social skills training by means of practice in role-play” (2000, p.15). To Landy and Montgomery, therapeutic theatre is “a form of theatre production by, with and for a particular population in need of expressing their issues and sharing them with a group” (2012, p.258). In therapeutic theatre, the scene for personal healing is set without prescribing the treatment with preference given to fictional stories. This study considers therapeutic theatre as a self-proclaimed fiction. It is a way of encouraging vulnerable people to look more courageously at the challenges and rewards of becoming more involved with life.

In other words, it is a therapeutic development of a play or performance in which roles are established with intentional therapeutic goals in mind or not; facilitated by a trained facilitator or therapist; brought to culmination in a performance for a community beyond the social sphere of the group; and the entire process having a post-performance processing or discussion by the group to deal with all the issues that have been raised, provoked and evoked by the performance experience. This does not make the process therapy but it stays and remains therapeutic because of its impact on the participants (mental, emotional and behavioural).

Using theatre acting, in mental health which falls within the confines of therapeutic theatre will facilitate remediation, rehabilitation, personal and social adjustments of the participants involved and make the entire process to serve as ‘a specific form of intervention to bring about intrapsychic, interpersonal, or behavioural changes’ (Irwin, 1979, p.23). Theatre and acting now become a form of expression applied in mental health.

IV- The social and developmental value of acting as therapy.

Studies like Jones’ (1996 & 2007), have highlighted the fact that some basic dramatic elements like improvisation, role play, storytelling, mask work, theatre games can intervene in a dramatherapeutic intervention. Improvisations for instance, can be used during warm up and focusing. They engage in the body/mind relationship: physical co-ordination, concentration and physical expression; working with others: engaging in

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physical activities with others, engaging in imaginative activities with others, working on emotions with others; using materials: using objects physically, using objects imaginatively, projecting feeling into material; and issues: group or individual emotional material.

Landy and Montgomery (2012) portray the use of these theatre techniques in what they call 'theatre for change'. The vignettes have enriching qualitative results on the benefits of play and acting across the world. Attigui in a similar way, applies theatre and acting in the hospital setting in Lyon (2012, p.19). She created a theatre troupe within the hospital (la Compagnie du Toucan Bleu) which has produced over 15 performances with 'surprising therapeutic and psychic revelations'. The following results were obtained from a majority of the patients who have gone through Atigui's therapeutic modality:

- For those who had total exclusion, a cataclysm of social link, theatre and acting enabled 15 of them to be reinserted socially.
- The hospitalised patients witnessed real evolution. The understanding of illness was put to question and it was no longer viewed as a limitation. Acting permitted the patients to understand their state and the power to re-establish the truth of the emotions incarnated in the characters.
- The theatre experience changed the comprehension of psychosis: it did not only change the caregivers' view on psychosis but modified the truth of the patient. (Atigui 2012, p.218)

The therapeutic effects of theatre and acting in Attigui's works are also exemplified through concepts of holding, handling and object presenting developed by Winnicott. It is in a similar way that Minet (2006) works with patients in a psychiatric hospital in Brussels. Lodged in the Hôpital du Jour, Centre Hospitalier de Brugmann, teatrotherapeutic techniques are used with patients in order to promote wellbeing. They enable mental patients to develop coping capacities with their pathologies, overcome social stigma and above all, facilitate re-integration into their communities. Though these two cases are hospital-based, some experiments with mental health in communities do also exist.

Moran and Alon in 'Playback theatre and recovery in mental health: preliminary evidence' use theatre and acting techniques in the University setting with mental health patients. 19 participants were involved in a two 10-weeks playback theatre course on people in recovery from severe mental illness. Quantitative and qualitative results are obtained from this practice. The use of stories enabled an increase in self esteem which improved interpersonal interactions outside the class. Fun and relaxation which help people to let go of anxiety was noted as part of the personal benefits. Though this practice per se, still lags behind in Africa, the present study focuses on the use of one area, therapeutic theatre, within the hospital setting.

Therapeutic theatre as such, is considered as a process in which actors and audience engage to become more aware of health problems and wellbeing (mental, emotional, and social). Landy (2013), holds that therapeutic theatre is all about healing and changes. This includes behavioural and social change. The participants (actors) get involved in a production after which they dialogue with the audience on the theme(s) treated.

The production remains a play, written to be performed, and being performed. The greatest therapeutic effect is obtained through this understanding. Therapeutic theatre can be a scripted play staged by professional actors before an invited audience concerned in one way or the other with the theme treated or an improvised conflicting play and improvised training which heightens the participant's ability to communicate feelings and thoughts verbally and by gestures, and reduces tension through relaxation exercises (Petzold, 1975, p.117-26). The scene for personal healing therefore is set without prescribing the treatment. Whatever methodology is used, which ever setting chosen, the end results of acting activities within a therapeutic set-up are geared towards the promotion of a greater personal and social development of the participants.

Conclusion

As it stands, acting/playing is seen as an important facet of human development. Being most of the times voluntary and intrinsically motivated, acting/playing has various outcomes like recreation, pleasure and in the case of health, therapeutic. In this latter, it takes the notion of theatrical play or acting and is applied in various settings by practitioners to respond to specific needs that might arise amongst participants working

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together. Most children partake in acting/playing activities but the manner of engagement in each varies from culture to culture and from an artistic form to another. Theatrical play or acting, through improvisation and other therapeutically proven activities and techniques, enables participants' to develop means of communicating feelings, misunderstandings and concerns in a language that is not limited to a particular linguistic setting. In the quest for a therapeutic outcome, theatrical play or acting provides the avenue for participants to obtain personal and social development and wellbeing.

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