



Drama Therapy — An Introduction

Douglas Green, MFT, LPCC

If you are ever fortunate enough to visit Athens, you may find yourself at the Acropolis, where the ruins of the great Theater of Dionysus stand — the actual stones where the timeless plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were first performed.

What might surprise you, though, is the ruins of a hospital lying next to it. In fact, every theater in Greece at that time was built next to a hospital, to the degree that they were considered part of the same institution.

The Hellenic Greeks had what we today would call an Eastern view toward health, considering it to be a state of balance between the mind, body and soul. If you were ailed, you would be sent to the hospital for herbs or surgery, but also prescribed to see a play. Not for entertainment (the Romans came up with that concept later), but as a religious ritual, where viewing a poetically-performed tale of the gods or heroes would vicariously raise you, in your mind and soul, to increase that healthy balance.

As in so many areas, ancient societies have a lot to teach us today about mental health.

Some years ago, I was in therapy to deal with pretty severe anxiety. My wonderful therapist taught me a great deal about the causes of my problems, what

I had misinterpreted in my life and so on. But I was not changing much; I just understood it all better.

Then a strange thing happened. I signed up for a Meisner acting class to learn some skills for my work, assuming I would be the worst actor in the class — as I had found that usually to be the case. But as I struggled to “get out of my head,” “live in the moment” and “react truthfully to imaginary circumstances,” I found a marvelous side-effect. Suddenly, my therapy started working; I was changing in the ways I had hoped.

Years later, I became a therapist myself. And in my education, I came upon the concept of Drama Therapy. I realized this meant that I could help my clients do what I had done in co-experiencing my therapy and that acting class. They could change and grow much more quickly and easily (and without having to learn all those lines!)

Drama Therapy, in one form or another, has existed for millennia. The Ancient Greeks had their aforementioned theater-hospitals. Aristotle wrote of the effects of Catharsis from witnessing theater. And countless religions have, to this day, had healing rituals in which participants enact archetypal roles.

Then in the 1920s, while Stanislavsky was redefining



acting, Vladimir Iljine created a concept of therapeutic improvisational theater. More famously, J.L. Moreno, a contemporary of Freud in Vienna, created the concept of Psychodrama — in which participants re-enact painful or traumatic experiences. (Psychodrama, while part of Drama Therapy, is too intensive and demanding a process to be covered in this article; it should only be practiced after training from a qualified Psychodramatist.) Since then, multiple professionals have found ways to use Drama Therapy in hospitals, clinics and schools to help with everything from special needs children to schizophrenia to marital difficulties.

The key element of Drama Therapy, and a reason it often can work with resistant clients, is the “Distancing Factor.” Any item used in therapy, other than the therapist and patient, that frees the client from solely talking about themselves — a Jungian sand tray, a Gestalt empty chair or of course all the toys and games in Play Therapy — serve as Distancing Factors. These Distancing Factors triangulate within the therapeutic dyad, enabling the client to express or feel unacceptable feelings through the third party.

Abused children are often given dolls, with which they will show what was done to them — in ways

As in so many areas, ancient societies have a lot to teach us today about mental health.

So, what is Drama Therapy? Simply put, it is the use of any technique from the theater, for therapeutic purposes. It might include acting something out, but also art, music, costumes, masks, writing... you name it.

In a clinical context, though, it is the use of the creative and active for therapy.

For many people, life forces or allows us to live in our heads and feel detached from our core selves. The pain and anxiety this creates leads us to look for help, but what we get from books, lectures, talk shows and most therapy simply increases our education. Drama Therapy, however, engages both our bodies, in action, and the creative parts of our brains. This engagement bypasses, overrules or tricks that clever intellectual part into allowing actual change to occur.

Drama Therapy shares much with somatic and mindfulness-based therapies, engaging the mind-body connection. But by including the Creative, Drama Therapy also makes the patient’s mind an active participant in the work. (Therapists, think of that advice your teachers gave you, to “Never work harder than your clients.” Having them engage creatively *guarantees* this.)

their trauma would never allow them to verbally relate. Take this to an adult level and see how many secrets that a person would never naturally divulge come out in their drawing, poetry or acting. Often this use of the Distancing Factor enables them to see new qualities in themselves and new possibilities for movement and change.

Because any creative activity can work as a Distancing Factor, any therapy that involves creativity and action qualifies as Drama Therapy. But here are a few easy and inexpensive techniques any therapist can use:

Four Drawings. This is particularly useful for new or highly resistant clients. I found it excellent in addiction groups, for example — patients whose difficulty connecting to their own feelings had led them to self-destructive numbing behaviors.

The therapist gives each patient paper and crayons and asks them to divide their paper into four sections. In each section, they draw an event from their life. Perhaps it is a realistic image (their wedding), a symbolic one (a broken heart) or a representative one (a football). Not necessarily their life’s most important events — just four that come to mind.



When they are done the therapist has the patient(s) share one or maybe two of the drawings, telling what it represents and why it is important to them.

Note: Allowing the patient(s) to not divulge all the stories helps them feel safe in this environment. Perhaps it even inspires them to “rebel” by telling more!

Sociometry. This creation of J.L. Moreno is a simple group activity, in which the therapist divides the room into different areas (corners work well) and asks the patients to move to different ones based on questions the therapist asks. “Everyone who was born in this city, move to that corner.” “Everyone who has a pet move to this corner.”

Members of the group will experience their identity in different ways as it progresses. If so desired, the therapist can move to more difficult questions, “Everyone who has been in a fight with a loved one lately, move over there” or “Atheists over here.” But be warned, this can create a sense of alienation in a new group. I would particularly warn against deeply personal information unless the group warrants it, “If you have been sexually abused” or “if you have had an abortion,” for example.

An additional activity I like is a more detailed Sociometry. For example, I will tell a group of forty people to form a line in the order of their feelings about The Beatles, from who likes them the best, down to who most dislikes them. The only way for them to do this is to figure out questions to ask each other. Initially they will form sections (Love ‘em, Like ‘em, Okay with ‘em, Hate ‘em), but then have to find deeper specifics — “I saw them at Shea Stadium,” “I know every word to the White Album by heart,” “My parents burned their records,” — creating a safe yet interesting way to get to know each other and express themselves.

Puppets. Puppets are excellent for this work, as they both engage our childhood selves and are highly expressive. Asking patients to pick from a group of puppets to find the one that best represents them, or the one they would most like to be, can be highly powerful.

(Children usually do not need to be asked; they will just grab the ones that feel right and start working their issues out right in front of you, if you are smart enough to step out of the way!)

Shadow Masks. Another very powerful activity involves giving the patient(s) construction paper, scissors and crayons, and asking each to make a mask of the part of themselves they do not show to others. If appropriate, you can include a discussion of Jung’s concept of the Shadow Self, but the exercise works very well even with a lighter, less intense rationale.

Once they have made the masks, have them interact with each other, wearing the mask, and speaking as that quality of themselves. This can be done in an individual session, if so I would recommend that the therapist do it themselves as well, so as to lessen the “labeling” danger. Clients often enjoy the therapist’s transparency in showing their own issues.

One theatrical note: Many clients will introduce themselves in their mask as “I have this issue where I cannot express anger” or such. If so, direct them to play the quality instead: “I am so angry! I am always pissed off!” That is the full engagement that helps create the change. However, this can also prove disturbing for some patients; if so, be sure to allow them to stop the exercise.

A therapist can take the concept of Drama Therapy in endless directions. Writing, for example — whether narratively writing out experiences, just writing out words to express their feelings or creating poetry, songs or raps — elicits a different part of the brain from talking and often brings out feelings and thoughts the patient was unaware of. If the patient feels very safe, one way to increase this quality is to have them write with their non-dominant hand.

In the end, Drama Therapy works because, while we think of theater as “entertainment,” the actual definition of that word means “to show hospitality to; to keep, hold or maintain in the mind; to receive and take into consideration.”¹ This is exactly what therapy aims to achieve.



Drama Therapy — An Introduction

In Greek, the word for soul is *Psyche*. And the word for mind is *Logos*.

So, in its work to raise the soul and mind, the first Psycho-Logist was a stage. Transform your office into one and watch the magic happen. €



Author Douglas Green can be found at
www.DouglasGreenMFT.com.

Reference

1. Entertain. (n.d.). *Merriam-Webster*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/entertain>