

Chapter Twenty-One

Performance, Theater, and Improvisation

Bringing Play and Development into New Arenas

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A review of the use of theater outside of the confines of traditional theater first needs to synthesize two historically different understandings of play: the theatrical one, as in creating or putting on a play, and pretend play, the activity traditionally associated with early childhood. One way to understand the relationship between these two types of play is through the lens of performance.

In the past two decades performance has broken out of the confines of the theater and has become a recognized tool in fields as diverse as psychotherapy, business development, and international relations. Performance that supports learning and development, which is sometimes referred to as applied theater (or in some cases applied improvisation), has come into its own, with graduate programs at several universities, conferences for practitioners and researchers, and a host of workshops for ordinary people. While these practices come out of a range of theoretical, political, and psychological traditions, they share the premise that theatrical activities that are usually reserved for professional actors have value off the stage for ordinary people.

This chapter begins by introducing a postmodern Vygotskian influenced understanding of the relationship among play, performance, and human development and then goes on to use the lens of performance to examine the work of theater and performance practitioners working outside or alongside of the traditional theater arena. Examples of research and practice from programs that work with populations considered at risk or underserved (urban youth, people with autism, Alzheimer's and dementia patients, and incarcerated individuals) are analyzed in order to describe the importance of this emerging field of play work.

TOWARD A PERFORMATORY UNDERSTANDING OF PLAY AND DEVELOPMENT

In the past twenty years there has been a turn in psychology toward performance. The premise of this turn is that most of human life is performed and that human beings, through performance, are the active and social creators of our world (Friedman & Holzman, 2014). This understanding is in contrast to much of the history of psychology, which has positioned people

as primarily thinkers (cognitive psychology) or as sophisticated animals who behave in response to stimuli (behaviorism).

The shift toward performance locates humanity as completely social from the start; performance takes place in the world, not in our heads, and it places our ability to pretend, imagine, and create at the center of what makes us human. From this perspective what pretend play and theater-making share is that they are activities in which the human ability to perform is overt, and in which it is therefore possible to explore the relationship between performance and development.

Psychologists and educators have long promoted pretend or dramatic play as a key developmental activity for preschool-age children (Berk, 2009; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Winnicott, 1982). Pretend play, with its overt focus on fantasy, “what if,” social interaction, and imitation, provides children with an environment where they can, as Vygotsky says, perform “a head taller” than they are (1978, p. 102).

In play children are the active creators of their activity, and this allows them to try out new roles, relationships, and skills in a low-risk environment. Children are able to do many things in play prior to being able to do them in the rest of their lives. When children play at cooking, for example, they do not have to know how to cook. In the process of creating the play, they create their performance of being a cook. As Vygotsky (1978) points out, that lack of necessary prerequisite knowledge makes play an optimal zone of proximal development, where children can do what they do not *know* how to do.

Most contemporary theories of development, including those that rely on the work of Vygotsky (1978), recognize that pretend play begins to diminish as children leave early childhood and enter primary school (Berk, 2009; Crain, 2005). The skills children learn through play—by doing what they do not yet know how to do—are then put to use for academic learning, work, and games with rules in older childhood and adulthood. According to some theorists, the creativity that is outwardly expressed in pretend play turns inward in the form of imagination (Gajdamaschko, 2005; Marjanovic-Shane & Beljanski-Risti, 2008). Pretend play, from these perspectives, is part of a developmental stage; it serves a purpose and then fades away.

Recently, however, some scholars have turned their attention to the importance of pretend play throughout the life span (Caposella, 2000; Göncü and Perone, 2005; Perone, 2013; Rognli, 2008; Terr, 2000). In particular, activities that allow people to *socially* exercise their imagination have been highlighted as key for mental and emotional health and as supportive of creativity and productivity throughout the life span.

One way that the pretend play of early childhood manifests itself later in life is in the realm of the performing arts, including theater, dance, improvisation, and music. These activities share some important characteristics with children’s pretend play. Both include social imagination and creativity and, because they are not closely tied to “reality,” both play and the performing arts provide opportunities for people to experiment with and create new ways of being, seeing, and relating.

Newman and Holzman (1993; Newman, 1996; Holzman, 2009) argue that our human ability to perform goes beyond the stage, and is inextricably linked to the possibilities for lifelong development. They have expanded, in both practice and theory, on Vygotsky’s (1978) insight that very young children perform a “head taller” in play. Babies and toddlers learn through the process of playing in ways that are beyond their present abilities, but that they will grow into (i.e., speakers of language, readers of books, sketchers of pictures). In other words, in their everyday lives, young children *perform* who they are becoming. Children perform as

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conversationalists by taking turns babbling and become speakers; they perform as readers by pretending to read, as they become readers.

According to Newman and Holzman (1993; Newman, 1996; Holzman, 2009) older children and adolescents can do the same, when given the opportunity. They can perform both on stage and off, and learn and develop in the process. Newman and Holzman argue that the ability to *perform* is a critical characteristic of being human. Human beings are, as far as we know, the only species capable of both being who we are and also performing who we are not. It is possible to perform Macbeth while still remaining Laurence Olivier. People can do this off the stage as well. For example, when people first become parents, they are performing both as who they are, people who do not know how to parent, and who they are not, or who they are becoming, parents.

While all human beings have the ability to perform both on and off the stage, not everyone has the opportunity. When early childhood and its socially sanctioned play activities end, often at around age six, children are sent the message that it is time to stop playing around (performing who you are not) and stick to discovering/being who you are. Performance play becomes a specialized activity that is primarily reserved for professionals or skilled amateurs.

And while the transition away from play and performance happens to almost everyone, there are some groupings of people who are very pointedly related to as unable, unworthy, or so in need of other types of intervention that they almost never have opportunities for performance play.

The lack of possibility to be other than who they are has particular consequences for inner-city youth, people with autism, Alzheimer's and dementia patients, and prisoners, because, while all adults have identities they can be stuck in, some identities are particularly constraining and provide limited opportunities for development. The emerging field of applied theater, as well as other performance programs that use theater with nontheater professionals, has begun to address the need for play and performance in the lives of these groupings of people.

THEATER PROGRAMS

With a few exceptions theater practitioners who work with nonprofessionals do not bring a developmental understanding of performance to their work; therefore the purpose of this chapter is to examine these programs through the lens of performance in order to gain an understanding of their developmental qualities. This review focuses on an analysis of programs that work with four groups of people who do not usually have opportunities to do theater.

The first group, inner-city youth living in poverty, often have reduced time and certainly less access than their more affluent peers to high-quality play experiences or outside of school experiences that support their development (Newman & Fulani, 2011; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). Research conducted in the past ten years has demonstrated that the difference in outside-of-school lives, in particular restricted access to cultural and creative activities that connect young people to the broader society, contributes greatly to what Kurlander and Fulani (2009) call the "development gap."

Another group for whom play is considered a luxury or even impossible are the growing number of children and youth diagnosed with autism. According to the DSM IV, a diagnosis of autism often includes a "lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level" (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 1994). Most educational or therapeutic programs for children with autism forgo creative activities in favor

of behavior management and remediation (Josefi & Ryan, 2004; Mitteldorf, Hendricks, & Landreth, 2001).

The number of people living with Alzheimer's or dementia has risen dramatically in the past ten years. Not surprisingly, this has led to a corresponding increase in the research to try to develop a cure or at least a treatment that will slow the course of the disease. However, despite growing evidence of the positive impact of humor and playfulness on health, there has until recently been little focus on play for people living with dementia.

Finally, while there has been a long history of theater in prisons, the current shift in emphasis from rehabilitation to punishment (Benson, 2003) and the trend toward the privatization of prisons, with a concurrent focus on efficiency and cost-effectiveness, has put programs that provide prisoners with cultural and artistic activities under attack.

To complete this review, a search was done for research on theater programs that are directed at one of these four populations. This kind of theater and performance work is relatively new, and there are a limited number of published academic research studies. While one might argue that the field is not ready for a full review, I believe that the body of evidence documenting its value for human development is quite strong, and that its importance to the field of play is great.

In order to provide a rigorous examination of the programs described, I include a wide range of sources, including empirical research where available, practitioner research, and in some cases mainstream movies and news reports on the programs. When nontraditional sources are used, the firsthand accounts provided were analyzed and evaluated for reliability. The second step in the review was to analyze and synthesize the available research within each of the four populations and to search for common themes or patterns. Three major themes emerged: (1) embracing and building with limitations, (2) performing beyond identity, and (3) performing emotional pain.

Embracing and Building with Limitations

The children, youth, and adults who participated in the theater programs described in this chapter were all living with challenges. While the nature of the challenges vary, with some clearly socially produced and others perhaps more biological, all of them have an impact on the day-to-day lives of the participants. Whether it is the impact of growing up poor or the deterioration of one's ability to remember, the challenges often created stigma, isolation from the rest of society, and a subsequent decrease of developmental experiences. A theme that runs through many of the theater and performance programs is the creation of a safe space where participants can be themselves without fear of embarrassment or ridicule. In addition, at the same time that the programs are fully accepting, they also provide a way for the participants to engage in new and often challenging activities.

Kelly Hunter, an actress with the Royal Shakespeare Company, has developed the Hunter Heartbeat Method (Hunter, 2013) for working with children with autism. The approach is based on two discoveries about the inherent value of Shakespeare for this population. The first is the apparent calming effect of Shakespeare's use of the iambic pentameter rhythm, which mimics the sound of a heartbeat and allows the participants to feel safe to communicate. The second discovery is that the themes of Shakespeare's plays, which she calls "an exploration of the Mind's Eye," provide people with autism a way into imaginative and emotional worlds that they have not been able to access or create themselves.

The Hunter Heartbeat program is being piloted and studied at Ohio State University Nisonger Center for research, education, and clinical services for people with developmental disabilities. The initial pilot consists of ten weekly workshops with fourteen children between

the ages of ten and thirteen with a diagnosis of autism or Asperger's. The children range from very high functioning to almost completely nonverbal. A faculty member trained in the Hunter approach facilitates the workshops, and professional acting students who were being trained in the approach assist her.

The program includes a series of games that were developed from the plot of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, "while emphasizing the themes of the eye, the mind, and the heart" (Mehling et al., 2012, p. 1). The pilot study seeks to discover whether participation in the program has a positive impact on facial emotion recognition, communication, social skills, and pragmatic language. While the quantitative results are still pending, the researchers have provided a series of videotapes for analysis.

The program (Nisonger Center, 2012) begins with the group sitting in a circle saying hello in a two-beat rhythm while tapping the same beat out on their hearts. They then go on to play a game in which one person plays Caliban (the "creature" who is discovered to live on the island) and the other Miranda (the daughter of the play's protagonist). The game is an extrapolation of the scene in the play where Miranda teaches Caliban to say his name. Two acting students demonstrate the game for the group and then the participants break up into pairs.

In the video we see a young girl with autism struggling to teach her partner (a young woman acting student) to say Caliban. She is deeply focused on the task and does not break eye contact with her partner for the entire five-minute exercise. The intensity of the connection between them is palpable in the video, and the joy on the girl's face when "Caliban" says his name gives expression to her commitment to the activity, as well as the intimacy of the game.

The workshops give the young people with autism an opportunity to play within a safe environment. Children with the full range of symptoms are represented, including those who are nonverbal and prone to repetitive movements. There is no need for them to hide their idiosyncratic behaviors; in fact, throughout the entire video there are no reminders to stop hand flapping or rocking, or to look someone in the eye. However, this does not stop the program from providing the children with experiences that take them outside their comfort zone.

One of the hallmarks of the Hunter program is the performance of the intense emotions that are an integral part of Shakespeare's plays (i.e., jealousy, love, ambition, anger). The acting students serve as skilled imitative partners for the children. Because it is a performance, there is no expectation or evaluation of whether the children's emotions are "real" or even original. They are free to imitate the adults, and this provides an opportunity for experimentation.

One way to understand this is that by performing characters with heightened emotions, rather than trying to be themselves, the children have an opportunity to *create* an emotional experience with other people rather than feeling pressure to *express* their individuated feelings. In theater, emotions are related to as activities to be performed, whereas in much of life they are related to as states of being that the individual then expresses. The freedom to perform appears to help the children to expand their emotional repertoire.

While the Hunter method focuses on using scripted scenes, other theater professionals utilize devised theater to allow young people with autism to make use of who they are to create a play. Devised theater does not begin with a script; the play originates with the group and is generated from people working in collaboration. In his capacity as a drama teacher at a small residential school for adolescents diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, Murray (2011) performed a three-year performative inquiry study.

In the following excerpt from Murray's study, he describes a moment in one of his drama classes. The class had been meeting for over a year, and one of the students (Adrian) had not

yet participated in any of the theater activities. Murray had encouraged, but not insisted, that he join in, but the boy had spent most of his time “sitting in a chair doing nothing.”

One of the characters that emerged in the play was the Prince. As the improvised performance developed the Prince decided that he really needed an assistant. He asked me if this was ok and I said that it was a good idea, but there was no one left in the room who was free to play the part. As I was busy thinking if he, I, or someone else could play this extra role, the person playing the Prince approached Adrian with a proposal:

Prince: Do you want to be my assistant?

Adrian: What would I have to do?

Prince: Nothing. You just have to sit on a chair and do nothing. Can you do that?

Adrian: (after some thought) Yes.

Prince: Good, then you can be “sitting on a chair doing nothing Prince’s assistant.”

Adrian: OK.

Adrian played the part of “sitting on a chair doing nothing Prince’s assistant” for the rest of the session. (Murray, 2011, pp. 163–164)

Murray goes on to describe how, over the course of the next few sessions, Adrian came further into the scene, through a process of adding more to his character’s participation, without ever getting up from his chair. He went from “sitting on a chair doing nothing Prince’s assistant,” to “sitting on a chair doing nothing Prince’s assistant with a plastic bottle,” and finally to a performance of “sitting on a chair doing nothing Prince’s assistant with a plastic bottle hitting people on the head from time to time as long as it doesn’t hurt them.”

This excerpt is an example of Adrian’s growth, and it highlights a key characteristic of the ways devised theater can be developmental for the participants. In this example Adrian was not asked to stop being himself; instead, what he was doing was included in the totality of the performance activity. While this kind of inclusivity is valuable for anyone, for children with autism, who struggle to overtly pretend, the inclusion of who they already are in the pretense allows them to participate in an imaginary situation. In the case of Adrian, the total performance transformed, and from his new location as a character in the scene, Adrian began relating to himself as a participant and a performer.

In addition to a loss of cognitive functioning, Alzheimer’s and dementia patients often experience isolation and loneliness as they become less able to participate appropriately in many social situations. Several research and social service organizations have begun to turn to improvisation as a means of creating a safe space for elderly participants to socialize.

In partnership with The Northwestern Cognitive Neurology and Alzheimer’s Disease Center (CNADC) the Lookingglass Theatre created The Memory Ensemble: An Improvisational Theatre Experience for People with Memory Loss, an eight week intervention for people with early stage Alzheimer’s (Memory Ensemble, 2012; Reeves, 2010). The program is still in the pilot phase, but preliminary research has identified a trend toward improvement in quality of life, and post-tests performed after each session show that participants experience feelings of success and empowerment during and after the program.

Many of the participants in the Lookingglass program speak about how having Alzheimer’s has changed how they relate to themselves and how others relate to them. As the spouse

of one of the participants says, “[T]here is still so much of him [my husband] and we still have a deep relationship, and what is hard for me, is that it can’t really grow” (Hill, 2011). The loss of the expectation of development can be as devastating as the loss of memory.

According to the facilitators of the program, they choose to utilize improv theater because of its focus on acceptance; “No experience required [to participate in the program], no script, there is no memorization; they bring to it just their creative potential and they are so successful at this” (Hill, 2011).

The improv class provides a place where memory loss is not a hindrance, and it also gives participants an opportunity to perform as learners again. Many of the participants spoke of the joy they feel in trying something they have never done before. Participating in the improv classes provides an environment where the participants can learn a new skill, and in doing that discover that they are still capable of doing new things and of developing.

In improv everything anyone says or does can be considered an offer, and it is the job of the ensemble to use the offers they are given to create something together. According to a facilitator of The Memory Ensemble, “some of the basic tenets of improv that are perfect for working with people with dementia are the concept of *yes*. So fundamental to all our work is that whatever answer the person comes up with the rest of us are going to be able to work with it” (Hill, 2011).

In this statement one can see the potential value of improvisation for people who have lost their memory. Participation in improv is not premised on making sense or being understood; it is about making use of whatever is offered to create something new together. Whereas many of the participants said that their inability to remember kept them from fully or successfully participating in other life activities, in improv they felt no need to worry about being right or appropriate, and they could, as one participant said, “relax.”

Although the program does not lay claims to providing long-term improvement for those involved, there is evidence that the participants themselves found the program to be valuable in the rest of their lives:

I think we all have become more thoughtful in terms of the world in which we live and it will indirectly show itself in our families and in the wider world. I wonder how I should describe to a friend what we are doing? A lot of times in our situation we are sitting around talking about our problems and our difficulties and here we are not talking about our problems or our difficulties we are having fun and enjoying ourselves. (Hill, 2011)

Having a serious illness of any kind, but certainly one that affects such a key part of who you are and who other people think you are, can be all consuming and can easily produce the experience of having the world appear smaller. The Memory Ensemble workshops bring the participants out into the world in a way that is not focused on their illness, or even on themselves; instead, it gives them an opportunity to be creative and social.

The findings from the informal interviews with the participants of The Memory Ensemble are corroborated by a more formal study of an Australian respite program that provides training in stand-up comedy, improvisation, and humor to people with mild to moderate dementia (Stevens, 2012). This study focuses on interviews with the stakeholders who are impacted by the program: the stand-up comedian who facilitates, the participants, and their carers (caregivers).

As with the Memory Ensemble, improvisation appears to be a low-stress activity for the participants. In addition, the professional comedian who facilitates the respite program has found that people who are struggling with memory loss actually seem to make particularly good improvisers:

Having dementia appeared to make the participants more suited to improvisation and actually gave them the edge on a non-dementia participant. The usual reaction for a performer is to over-think and try and direct their performance rather than surrendering to the immediacy of a more response based interaction. The participants with dementia listened to each other for verbal cues and responded in the moment. This created constant humor and surprise. This was entertaining to watch, enjoyable and low-risk for the performers. It was virtually impossible for them to fail, even though the tasks appeared complex. (Stevens, 2012, p. 68)

Studies that examine the use of improv in a variety of fields have found that one of its values is that it breaks people out of the constraints that come with competing in a highly scripted society where “getting it right” can lead to competitiveness and diminish creativity (Johnstone, 1979; Pink, 2013; Spolin, 1986).

While there are obviously losses with dementia, the ability to give up being right in favor of creating with other people appears to bring dementia/Alzheimer’s patients pleasure and gives them access to a kind of development they may not have had since childhood.

Autism and Alzheimer’s are obviously very different experiences, but they share the consequence of isolating people because of their inability to follow societal norms. The theater programs that are described here are quite varied—ranging from playing improv comedy games to practicing Shakespeare—and they all manage to create an inclusive environment. In these programs the challenges facing the participants are not related to as impediments to doing something new, and in the case of Murray (2010) and the two Alzheimer’s programs, what can be described as symptoms become assets that are used to create new performances. This combination of full or radical acceptance and new and challenging activities is the cornerstone of how people relate to babies and small children (Newman & Holzman, 1993), but it is often missing from the lives of older children, adults, and those who are facing difficult challenges. These programs provide important evidence for the need to provide everyone with these kinds of developmental environments.

Performing Beyond Identity

One way to characterize the value of performance-based programs is that people learn and develop in environments in which they can choose to perform creatively (Heath, 2000; Holzman, 1997, 2000; Sabo-Flores, 2003). By taking on multiple roles, both on and off the stage, people come to see themselves as “capable of acting outside and beyond the expected” (Heath, 2000, p. 39). Theater programs give participants the opportunity to break out of expected roles and to try on new and more varied identities.

In her ethnographic study of the outside-of-school programs at the All Stars Project, Holzman (2009) interviewed young people who had participated in creating *Our City*, a devised play inspired by Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. In this play, the young people, who are all from inner-city neighborhoods and are predominantly African American, Latino, and Southeast Asian, go through a process of observing people on the streets and subways of New York City, research and learn about the types of characters they saw, and then create a play that involves the interactions among these various characters. Each young person plays multiple parts in the play, many of which cross gender, racial, and generational lines.

In interviews conducted several months after the production of the play, the youth talked about the developmental experience of grappling with who their characters were and with the process of working to be someone other than who you are:

Playing Ali and Erica really helped me explore me as a person, my values. They helped me think different. And it challenged me as an actress, because literally from one minute to the next I had to

change from a man to a woman. I would see New York through Ali's eyes, I would think the way he thinks, talk the way he talks. And when I would switch into Erica, I would walk down the street like I was a million dollars and I would ignore people. I really got into these characters and this show helped me to develop and grow not just as an actress but as a person. (Holzman, 2009, pp. 74–75)

Playing a character in a play is not the same as role-playing, where the focus is on practicing different types of roles or identities that the young person might want to become (Lobman & Lundquist, 2007). The young woman in this interview does not say that the characters of Ali and Erica have identities she wishes to imitate; instead she articulates the impact of the experience of trying to be someone different than herself.

From a developmental performance perspective, the *activity* of “being who you are not” is not instrumental—it does not lead directly to becoming a particular kind of person. The activity of creating theater is developmental because it gives the young people the experience of being active creators of their lives. They can recognize that they do not have to choose from a finite list of identities that have already been created; they can actively and continuously create new identities and ways of being in the world. This is particularly important for inner-city youth, many of whom, by virtue of their poverty and societal barriers, rarely are seen or see themselves as powerful.

Men and women who are living inside the prison system have an even more extreme experience of being stuck in an identity. In the edited volume *Performing New Lives* (Shailor & Ploumis-Devick, 2010), prison theater professionals and researchers share their efforts to implement creative experiences for prisoners. Shailor, who has worked in a medium-security Wisconsin prison since 1995, began by using role-play as a way to help the men develop better problem-solving and anger management skills. He gave them ways to experiment with alternatives to their “habitual ways of dealing with conflict” (Shailor & Ploumis-Devick, 2010, p. 181).

Over time Shailor discovered that beyond just being tools for learning new skills, theater, and in particular Shakespeare's plays, provides the men with “worlds to inhabit and explore.” By inhabiting the characters within these worlds, the prisoners have an opportunity to see their own lives in a new way.

Theatre creates a dual consciousness: one is both oneself and not oneself; a character, and not that character (true even when one is playing oneself). This opens up a space for reflection and evaluation. How am I like/not like this character? How do my own interpretations, motivations, and choices compare to those of this character? What is the best choice in this situation? These questions become more than academic as performers draw upon their own experiences to inhabit their role, as they stretch to perform in new ways, and as they encounter their spontaneous feelings and responses to the actions of other characters. (Shailor & Ploumis-Devick, 2010, p. 22)

While Shailor points primarily to the ways in which theater provides a space for reflection, he also discusses the developmental aspect of performance. By being given an opportunity to pretend to be “oneself and not oneself,” the men he works with have a way out of the straitjacket of entrenched identity.

By design, prisons are not supportive of pretending. They are built to constrain and control—and in doing so they limit people's ability to create something other than what they know. In general, isolation is not conducive to development, which thrives on diversity and space to creatively imitate “the other” (Holzman, 2009). Inside the prison theater introduces the other in the form of fictional characters, and it gives people an opportunity to play with a wide range of human options. From that vantage point the prison actors are able to break out

of the constraining identity of being a prisoner. They do not cease to be incarcerated, but now they are a prisoner *and* King Lear *and* a member of a performance ensemble. The freedom to pretend, usually reserved for small children and professional actors, opens up new possibilities and allows for transformation (Holzman, 2009; Newman & Fulani, 2011).

In her research on her work with women prisoners, Wilcox (2010) examines the juxtaposition of creating a play within a play in Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night Dream* with the experience of her women performers. She points out that the prisoners and the characters in Shakespeare's play are all people who "had no right to be doing theatre." From this vantage point the women relish the freedom to dress up, to build a set, to play against their personality type, and to make each other and the audience laugh. Wilcox describes this as giving the women an opportunity to "reinvent themselves." The playful pointlessness of the theater-making activity, along with the validation from the audience, provides a respite from the "dehumanizing" effects of prison.

Taylor (2010) describes her struggles during her undergraduate field experience in a juvenile corrections facility with the contradictions of creating theater for social justice within the confines of the prison system. Taylor's work is improvisational and emergent. Rather than using scripted plays, she creates devised theater in which the young women can "have the conversations they didn't know they had the words for, and speak to the friends who had so often ignored them" (p. 202). According to Taylor, over time the project helps free the girls from some of the constraining roles they are cast in while growing up poor:

[W]hen it comes down to it, this theatre is about freedom. The improv games, icebreakers, the scene creation, its all about arriving at that point in which we as individuals become free, free from our histories that keep us confined in a one dimensional version of ourselves. In this theatrical process we become complex, dynamic individuals who give and share and learn from each other and learn to love. (p. 211)

For Taylor and many of the other artists/activists, prison theater ultimately goes beyond personal growth to be a form of protest against prisons and to create power among the prisoners (Trounstine, 2007; Wray, 2011).

Creating art is dangerous. Art gives a voice to those who have lost theirs; it provides opportunities for confidence, self-worth, and accomplishment. It empowers people to make change in their own lives. Creating art in prison is an act of resistance against the isolation, physical degradation, and humiliation of prison and the society that fuels it. (Taylor, 2010, p. 198)

While programs that take place in prison must abide by the rules and regulations of the authorities, for the actors/prisoners and the theater artists/activists, the act of creating theater, of playing with roles and identities, and creating community, breaks through the inhumanity of prison life and creates an environment for individual and group development.

Performing Emotional Pain

A third theme that emerged from the analysis across the theater and performance programs is the ways in which participating in the theatrical activities creates a therapeutic environment. The stigma of autism or incarceration, the anxiety of poverty, and the frustration and loss of dementia and Alzheimer's can be enormously challenging and emotionally painful. Some of the programs described in this chapter are overtly therapeutic and others are not, but in both cases, what seems significant are the ways that emotions are made use of in the service of creating theater and the impact of that on the participants.

In a self-study of her own practice, Parkinson (2008) describes the adaptation of dramatic validation transformations (DVT), a form of drama therapy for use with people with Alzheimer's. Her practice combines validation therapy, in which the therapist joins the patient in his or her reality, and dramatic transformations, in which the client and therapist create a "play space" where emotional pain can be dealt with through improvisation, pretending, and playing. Using a multiple case study methodology, Parkinson (2008) provides support for the value of improvisational drama and free play for helping people with Alzheimer's live more gratifying lives.

Rather than attempting to create a coherent story or a culminating performance, Parkinson leads the participants through a process of free association improv in which they play with anything that emerges. In DVT, everyone agrees to accept that everything that happens during the session is pretend, but they work to make it appear "real" in a theatrical sense. According to the developers of the approach, it is "the fundamental paradox that something can be simultaneously real and not real" that allows people to "play with very real and often disturbing feelings, experiences, memories, and desires" (Parkinson, 2008, p. 211).

In this context memory loss goes from being a symptom, painful problem, or frustration, to material for the collective performance. In the following example from the study, Parkinson uses a "real" moment of forgetting to create a pretend play scenario:

"The, uh . . . um, the . . ." We all listen patiently as Iris continues. "Oh dear, I've lost it. It was a 'c' word." "Oh no!" I shout playfully. "Our dear friend Iris has lost a 'c' word! Does anyone see a 'c' word lying around here somewhere? Quick! Check under your chairs!" We all lean down and start searching around our seats for the missing word. "I guess it flew away," I say. Donald begins to flap his arms and we all join him, embodying the words as they fly away. "How are we going to catch them?" I ask. Donald cowers playfully and says: "Don't catch me!" I melodramatically sneak up and place my hands on his shoulders. "Gotcha!" I exclaim as he screams playfully. The group offers different ideas for how to catch the words. Together we pull down a giant word trap and some word food to put inside of it. . . . With exaggerated care and tenderness I scoop up an imaginary word that had come to rest on Rose's knee and offer it to Iris. "I don't want that one either!" she says with an irritated tone. I kneel down before her. "Iris, I bet what you want is for them to stop flying away in the first place, huh?" (Parkinson, 2008, p. 211)

There are a number of ways to understand what is therapeutic about this play scenario. On the one hand, Parkinson (2008) provides the patient with an interpretation of what she is feeling ("I bet what you want is for them to stop flying away in the first place"). From this perspective, the therapy lies in giving the patients access to their inner feelings and validating them.

A performance lens provides another way of seeing this moment. From this perspective it is the activity of socially playing with the experience of "losing words" that is emotionally freeing. In creating the play, the ensemble (therapists and patients) had the experience of making something out of the pain—of being creators—something that can be rare in the lives of Alzheimer's patients.

While there is no evidence that theater activities can cure people of dementia or Alzheimer's, the activity did appear to make people happier, more connected socially, and less depressed. In addition, while pretending, playing, and performing the Alzheimer's patients are able to remember lines, respond to others, and even play parts from their past that they are no longer able to do in the rest of their lives.

One of the hallmarks of autism is an inability to pretend. This has developmental consequences for children who do not have access to an activity that by its nature helps children to discover "the other" (LaCerva & Helm, 2011) and develop ways of relating socially. In 2004

Elaine Hall, an actor and mother of an autistic child, began The Miracle Project, a nonprofit, outside-of-school, devised theater program for youth and young adults with autism and their typically developing siblings and peers (Chiles, Regan, Alpert, & Regan, 2007). While there are no formal research studies done on the program, for the purposes of this chapter the HBO movie *Autism: The Musical* was transcribed and analyzed.

In the Miracle Project the idiosyncrasies of the participants are incorporated into the activities, and in some cases the children's social struggles become the content of the play. Wyatt, a fifth grader with Asperger's syndrome, spoke frequently throughout the project about his trouble having friends at school, and in particular his struggles with bullies. At one poignant moment he shares with his mother that the bullies "are growing up. And when bullies grow up they get meaner." In the following excerpt from the movie, Elaine asks the children to help write the story for the play:

Elaine: We are talking about writing a story.

Wyatt: I know a story about a bully. He says that he's going to punch, he's going to punch, seriously, if you touch him one more time he's going to punch you. I try not to say anything, but he keeps coming back. . . . That's all I want to say about that. Lets get on with acting.

Elaine: I'm glad you told us. Here is what I want. I want someone to be a bully.

Wyatt: I'll try and be a bully. I'll be a bully. (Chiles, Regan, Alpert, & Regan, 2007)

In the scene that follows, Wyatt performs as a bully who pretends to be nice in front of the teacher, then goes on to bully another child. As the scene continues he turns aside and says to Elaine, "I'm just acting." When the play is performed on stage a few weeks later, Wyatt plays a child like himself who is tormented by bullies and he sings a song called, "Am I Too Sensitive?" In this scene Wyatt is able to step out of being himself (the victim) and perform as someone else (the bully) (Chiles, Regan, Alpert, & Regan, 2007). What is apparent is that for Wyatt the experience of *pretending* to be the bully gives him an opportunity to look at his character from a different perspective, and this in turn opens up the possibility that he could use pretending and performing to handle other social issues in the future.

CONCLUSION

In looking across these four arenas in which theater is being utilized for developmental, therapeutic, and creative purposes, there are many similarities in the value that researchers and practitioners have found in the work. The participants, and in some cases their caregivers, report that the theatrical environment provides safety and acceptance. Many people spoke about the value of participating in activities in which they do not have to cover over their limitations or fit into a particular societal norm.

The playfulness of performance creates an environment where they are free to be themselves without fear of embarrassment or failure. In addition, in the theater programs there are opportunities to collaborate and create with peers, and this generates a sense of community that can support the participants through challenging life circumstances. And finally, all of the programs provide people who are living through painful or limiting experiences access to fun, laughter, and play.

While these benefits are important, seeing the theater activities described in this chapter through the lens of performance provides an additional understanding of their developmental

value. Seeing play as performance allows us to see the ways in which young children are able to develop. In play they are both who they are and who they are becoming (Newman & Holzman, 1993).

As Vygotsky (1978, p. 104) stated, play creates an environment for children to perform beyond their average age—to be as he said “a head taller than they are.” However, as the world is currently structured, most people leave pretending and performing behind when they leave early childhood.

Ironically, as we perform our way into cultural and societal adaptation, we also perform our way out of continuous development. What we have learned (through performance) becomes routinized and rigidified into behavior. We become so skilled at acting out roles that we no longer keep performing. We develop an identity as “this kind of a person”—someone who does certain things and feels certain ways. Anything other than that, most of us think is not being “true” to “who we are.” (Holzman, 1997, p. 108)

While it is the case that almost everyone engages in less play once they have “performed their way into societal roles and identities,” the impact is not the same for everyone. There are some groupings of people, who by virtue of their particular societal status, are more constrained by their identities than others. Young people living in poverty, those diagnosed with autism, incarcerated adults, and those with Alzheimer’s or dementia have identities that can be particularly limiting or all consuming. One of the results of having a fixed identity is that people are related to as being incapable of continuous development, which on top of the actual objective circumstances of their lives can be devastating.

The four groupings of people described in this chapter have that characteristic. Teenagers growing up in poverty are not given the same opportunities as their middle-class peers to play with the full range of societal roles, and therefore the variety of identities open to them is limiting. Children and youth with autism are believed to be incapable of imagination, and they are therefore given limited opportunities to play. Alzheimer’s patients and their families are struggling with the devastating impact of memory loss and do not, for the most part, think of development as possible. And society is deeply conflicted about giving people who have been convicted of crimes opportunities for enrichment.

In all these cases people are tragically related to as solely one thing: poor, impaired, or unworthy, and this in turn limits their ability to grow.

It is not possible, nor necessarily desirable, to exactly re-create the pretend play life of young children; however, theater is an activity that is done by older children and adults that shares many important characteristics with play. In theater, as in play, people do not stop being themselves when they perform; they are able to be both who they are and who they are not. In both theater and dramatic play it is possible to participate without knowing how, and while there are often rules, they are flexible and can be adapted to meet the needs and abilities of the participants. Finally, theater and play have a relaxed relationship to truth, and therefore participants are able to create new versions of themselves without being told to “be true to yourself.”

In all four arenas discussed in this chapter, there is evidence that theater programs are an opportunity for people limited by identity to go beyond their societal role and connect to their ability to perform—to be not only who they are but also who they are not:

[While] we as human beings may be “determined” by “the present state of things,” we have the capacity, through our everyday practice, to transform the way things are into something new, which then becomes the “present state of things” (a new totality). What is important to human

development in general and early childhood in particular is the characterization of people as changers and creators of new circumstances. (Lobman, 2005, p. 249)

By virtue of its strong relationship to children's pretend play, theater provides a structured way for participants to experience themselves "as changers and creators of new circumstances," and in doing so it allows people to give fuller expression to their humanity.

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