

approximating its goods already in this world, and by this concrete instantiation enhancing its appeal both to nonbelievers and fellow Christians.

Finally, in heaven one finds one's perfect self-fulfillment by giving oneself totally in the perfect communion of divine love. So, practicing the vows in a life centered in the Eucharist unites one with the Lord Jesus in special intimacy even now.

## **The Shared Journey**

### **Roger Grainger**

It has often been pointed out that drama—and theatre, its focused form—can be liberating to people who find themselves oppressed by what might be called 'restricted personhood', conditions of individual belonging which make it hard for them to be both independent and cooperative in their relationships with other people. Because of its combination of a definitive structure with a stimulating imaginative freedom, drama helps those contained within narrow personal boundaries, as in depression, or limited by the absence of recognisable structure, a stable and recognisable image of the self as distinct from other people, as in schizoid thought disorder.

These are not the only ways in which psychologically oppressed people are helped by the experience of participating, however sporadically, in an alternative world in which their difficulties no longer exert the same kind of hold upon them. Even those for whom theatricality constitutes a characteristic source of communication about their personal distress—hysteric personalities who act out their problems as an alternative to thinking about them—seem to gain insight from being included in other people's scenarios. This happens when they take an active part in the proceedings, as in drama, or when the magnetic force of theatre draws them into the action of the play without any conscious effort on their part—unless it be the determination to remain aloof! The most noticeable difference in behaviour occurs among people suffering from what are generally described as anxiety states, particularly social phobias, when the dramatic milieu reproduces the effects of desensitisation techniques within a wider, more realistic

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context, one which is more easily harmonised with life in the outside world; comprising, as it does, an exercise of imagination in which everyone present co-operates—an interchange of ideas, feelings and expectations which is not merely life-like but is human living.

Peter Brook has written eloquently about what he calls the Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible. He says that “the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold upon our thoughts.” (1968) I would go further and say that theatre, and the dramatic action in which it originates, is where we *make* invisible things visible. For all concerned, theatre is active, not passive. This is true of the back row of the gallery as well as the front rows of the stalls. (Indeed, the mechanism of theatre may make it more true of the former than the latter; they aren’t called ‘the gods’ for nothing!) Always, and everywhere, the healing power of theatre abides in participation, in action as well as passion, giving as well as taking. The things we see and hear, understand and interiorise, use and reject, are things we have contributed, our own things as well as things that we we have made our own. Here, as in all our life the healing power of the human spirit lies in its ability to share and be shared. Through the instrumentality of the dramatic idea this instinct of love—for that is what it is—is focused and magnified so that it may become strong enough to pierce the clouds around our heart, and kindle the fire which is ready to leap into flame in celebration of the most important thing about us—that we are human and that we *care*.

This is the “irrational living force” that Artaud warns us about: a presence barely held in check by our judgements as to what is “sensible” or “socially acceptable”, or “in line with my own personal way of looking at life”. Theatre is able to make this presence active within us, to unchain its forces and set them to work upon our lives. It is “cruel” because of the effect it has on our own selfishness, the gaping breach it makes in walls painstakingly erected and scrupulously reinforced over many years. We did not know we had feelings like these, having spent so much effort not to know, or at least not to acknowledge their full intensity, so that we really feel their biting edge. Consequently we do not know, apart from the play, where they come from, unless it be from the play. As Artaud says, they are “gratuitous”.

They do not come from the play, however, but from ourselves. Or rather, from ‘ourselves-together-in-the-play’. The play sets the scene for their rediscovery by heightening their effect and rendering it irresistible. For a hard-bitten Parisian audience of the first decades of the twentieth century, a good deal of heightening was doubtless necessary in order to shatter people’s defences against this kind of encounter with the healing

truth of our common belonging. In the case of the psychologically wounded men and women we have been considering above, the approach must be much gentler and more circumspect. The principle remains the same, however. It is love released by art, the shared experience of growing into relationship. Things are done more tenderly—they are the same things and have, in proportion, the same effect.

There is reason to believe that this kind of therapeutic approach may be more important now than ever before. In an age in which corporate rituals are the prerogative of limited sections of society, theatre retains its power to reach and involve large numbers of people. Even without the benefit of a religious way of interpreting life, audiences appropriate meaning of a personal kind as an unreal reality becomes a real unreality, and consequently a real possibility. The crucial role of the shaman is taken over by the theatrical character who leads us through the story unfolding before us. We identify with him, or her, and share his or her thoughts, feelings and attitudes, so that it is we who are humiliated and exalted, rejected, isolated and finally justified. At the same time, he or she is more than we are—more powerful, more pitiable, weaker and more courageous than we, gaining in stature from our corporate identification and by the symbolic resonance, the element of ideal truth which belongs to fictional characters who, even in comic situations, are larger than life, made larger by the intensified image we bestow upon them. In stories and plays, the ordinary is rendered extraordinary by the importance we afford it by our action of standing back for a closer look. Story and play are real because they are fiction. Their reality is our own, the reality we give them, returned to us in ways we can make use of by the fictional form which reveals it.

We can make use of this truth about ourselves in order to change and to grow as the character of the story changes and grows. In shamanistic rituals, the priest or shaman leads his disciples on a journey in which he and they penetrate ever more deeply into experiences of growing intensity, leading them out of the world of prosaic events, the ordinary life of everyday, into a place and time which is unrecognisable, where pain and pleasure, sense and nonsense, images of living and dying, are first of all intensified and then transformed. A place which is no-place, because none of the familiar landmarks exist and our ordinary ways of coping with what happens to us, the familiar sense we make of life, has lost its usefulness. The things learned in this central condition, it is claimed, may not be guessed in advance. They have not happened yet. Their relevance belongs to the journey home, the third stage of the shamanistic experience, in which life is lived in a new way, in the light

of what has been learned en route. The overall shape corresponds to that of the rite of passage, the three fold ritual which embodies change and progression throughout the world, and which often makes use of an actual journey from place to place. In such rituals the crucial central stage is symbolised by some kind of geographical location—a desert to cross, a forest to traverse, a mountain to climb, caves which must be penetrated in order to be re-born. Rites of passage are characteristically associated with initiations into a new religious and social status within the community although they are also used to mark important stages in people's lives of all kinds—seasonal festivals, for example. At least one theatre company has recently used this method in order to celebrate individual birthdays, 'realising' the change involved by the passing of another year with processions and ordeals in which the person concerned plays the leading role in the action. In the sense that they involve actual bodily involvement in the acting out of the story, such experiences are closer to drama (and drama therapy) than to the theatre.

Shamanism has definitely theatrical features too, however, involving as it does the induction of a trance-like state which is the exaggeration of the familiar Western 'suspension of disbelief' in which the willingness to concentrate on what is happening to the exclusion of all else is powerfully assisted by the focusing action of a story. Some of the ways in which theatre is used to produce a healing effect on states of mind make use of an imagined story which is told by the shaman-therapist. The following is an example. The group sits in a circle round the leader, who helps them to achieve the right state of physical relaxation by leading them in a series of exercises for this purpose. He or she next suggests to them that they should close their eyes. The leader begins to speak in a voice which is calm and gentle. (It is essential that there should be no outside interruption or 'noises off'.) He proceeds to take them with him on an imaginary journey, to a place or person of particular spiritual significance—somewhere or someone associated with healing, with strength or peace of mind. It is hard to arrive at this destination and involves passing through dangerous places or surmounting natural obstacles, and arriving itself is awesome because of a powerful symbolism attaching to the place and its inhabitants. After spending some time in the healing process, the journey back home again is begun, this time with the aid of the healing gifts bestowed 'at the centre'. Those involved in the process are given time to adjust to the journey's being at an end, before opening their eyes to a reality subtly changed by the experience. An alternative approach to this kind of 'fantasy journey' is to act it out in the setting of a large room or hall, making the actual movements and gestures described by the leader and

moving from one end of the space to the other over obstacles carefully placed to 'stand in' for natural hazards encountered. Having to make an actual journey and solve practical problems associated with overcoming various hazards along the way adds to the realism of the exercise, even though eyes must be kept open to avoid accidents. Both approaches use dramatic narrative to present a healing experience.

Insofar as it embodies a potent image of change, demonstrating the emergence of the new from the old in its essential form, as life out of death, the world of drama and theatre is one of almost infinite possibility. This is its ancient ritual identity, and the source of its healing power. All kinds of human problems, difficulties, restrictions, may be explored here, and not only explored but lived through. Our imagined pain, real enough while it lasts, brings a genuine experience of survival, even a kind of rebirth. The feeling of being taken on a journey lies at the very heart of the dramatic event. In the strength of focused imagination we are taken up, transported into the presence of danger, and delivered. When the play puts us down, it is in another place. This image of a shared journey is drama's most precious gift. The journey turns out to be a real one, as by stressing the difference between future and past, the play succeeds in uniting them in one reality. Sharing the journey with others is the most important thing about travelling like this, more important even than arriving at our destination, because it is the sharing that creates the distinction. In a real sense, it is the destination. Even when we set out alone, isolated from our fellow men and women by our unique individual misery, we finish the journey as partners and fellow travellers, restored to our identity as persons-in-relationship by the unique power of drama to involve us with one another at a level of experience at which we find resistance difficult to sustain, that of the fundamental sufferings and joys of our common humanity. Perhaps we grow closer together as we move onwards through the drama because we gradually become more aware that the experiences of the fictional characters arouse similar feelings in the rest of the audience (and cast) as they do in ourselves. Perhaps it is because the drama itself, in order to be the drama, demands an attitude of willingness to share on our part as the primary condition for making any kind of sense of what is going on in our lives. What is certainly true is that drama and theatre give us what, as human beings, we need most of all, permission to share. It does this by evading our defences, distracting us from our pre-occupations, and giving us a chance to recognise one another, and consequently ourselves.

#### References

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