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## **Feeling real and rehearsal for reality: psychosocial aspects of Forum Theatre in care settings and prison.**

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### **Abstract**

*This article discusses psychosocial aspects of a short drama module, drawing on observational research into the adaptation of Forum Theatre by Odd Arts Theatre Company for people in educational, care and custodial settings,. The course facilitated enactment of life experiences and choices, enhancing self-awareness and reflective capacity. The drama space is considered as 'third space', and a transitional space, where participants play with creative illusion in what Augusto Boal called a 'rehearsal for reality'. We argue that the use of third space and third position thinking is key to understanding Forum Theatre as a restorative practice both through rehearsal and in 'playing for real' before an audience - a symbolic community that offers the opportunity for recognition. Problems attendant on performance of 'false self' arise where there is collusive avoidance of difficult issues because the value of Forum Theatre lies in the achievement of authorship and authenticity – or 'true self' – publicly performed and owned. It is this that allows individuals to imagine a possibility of creative living in the future.*

**Key Words:** Forum Theatre, enactment, creative illusion, third space, transitional space, false self, psychosocial, restorative practice, care, custody

### **Introduction**

In this article we offer a psychosocial analysis of a Forum Theatre course targeted at young people and adults in care and custodial settings. We consider how devising and performing a drama entailed the production of 'third space' – a form of transitional space (Winnicott 1971) in which relations to reality can be re-figured. Applied theatre, has been defined by its educational purposes, or its ability to bring about social vitalization or behavioural change. As such it sits easily within a policy agenda that demands that publicly funded cultural programmes or interventions demonstrate social impact.<sup>i</sup> The theatre module we discuss here was designed with the unashamedly 'instrumental' goal of imparting employability and life skills<sup>ii</sup>. The question then becomes how far drama and theatre as a tool of individual or community transformation loses sight of its primary creative purpose as an arena of play whose critical value lies in its very pointlessness (Friedman 2010). Here we attempt to move beyond a reductionist identification of learning outcomes to identify the psychosocial

processes set in motion for participants and we ask how far the course succeeded in producing activities in which its specific educational goals were temporarily suspended in the service of 'pointless' creative illusion and whether paradoxically this might not have led to a profounder and more enduring form of learning, borne of the sense of agency that comes of 'feeling real'.

Our study involved observations of workshops led by the theatre company Odd Arts, who specialise in delivering drama courses to groups of young people and adults who are in one way or another challenged by the demands of mainstream education or employment<sup>iii</sup>. The Odd Arts Founders and Directors trained in Forum Theatre with Brazilian theatre activist Augusto Boal (1979). Our initial aim was to understand what skills and capacities their 'creative leadership' course developed in participants. Here our purpose is a psychosocial analysis of the particular contribution of setting and process to shifts in how participants felt and thought about their situation. We also attempt to show why the course could be considered as a 'restorative practice' that promotes authenticity, personal responsibility and an ability to see a situation from the perspective of others.

Forum Theatre was developed for political and social purposes, creating opportunities to challenge the status quo and design and propose social change. Arising from Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, it has also been used to explore and challenge behaviours that have had negative consequences for participants, those they interact with, or for society (Boal 1979) - for example by helping transform explosions of rage, into purposeful action. Forum Theatre works through what Boal called a 'rehearsal for reality' towards an interactive performance that invokes the audience as 'spect-actors' who can interrupt the show and alter the course of the action. Within the Odd Arts process, participants rehearse scenarios related to problems they have encountered, or are likely to encounter. Spect-actors then suggest alternative responses to 'real-life' dilemmas depicted in the drama, and identify new ways of confronting the problems faced by the actors (Boal 1979).

### **Forum Theatre with adult and youth offenders, or those at risk of offending**

Our study involved a comparison of work in four very different settings: an educational and training facility for young NEET learners (not in education, training or employment); two residential care homes for young people who were at high risk and/or had committed offences (care was in some cases a court mandated alternative to youth custody); and an adult category C prison. The interactive learning processes in the Odd Arts module involved a range of dynamic exercises, where participants imaginatively reflected upon the dilemmas performed. Usually there were no easy practical or emotional resolutions.

Odd Arts aims to enable the people they work with to develop new possibilities of self-expression through role play, character development and story-telling and that encourage a reflective, embodied approach to learning. By working collaboratively in a group to produce a short drama from a workshop-based rehearsal process, participants fictionalise their own experiences in dramatic form. They can thus project themselves into roles, establishing a third position from which to observe self in interaction with others and explore the complex feelings and conflicted states of mind associated with destructive relationships and actions. The final performance to an invited audience of staff, family or friends is an opportunity for voice and recognition.

We first establish a psychosocial frame to consider Forum Theatre, drawing on Donald Winnicott's account of the importance of transitional space and creative illusion in human

development (Winnicott 1971). We interpret the theatre space as a 'transitional and potential space', a third space created in the interplay between fantasy and reality. We then highlight the difference between the complex understanding of Forum Theatre that we characterise as 'psychosocial realism'<sup>iv</sup> and a cognitive behavioural approach, before introducing our study settings and methodology.

## **Forum Theatre**

Forum Theatre has been used globally in very diverse contexts (Thompson, 2000). Programmes have focused on improving the lives of people who have been oppressed, including victims of crime, young offenders, drug users, homeless people and prisoners (for example Thompson, 2000, Hughes, 2005, Cardboard Citizens, N.D). Previous studies have recorded the benefits in supporting people in care, custodial, education or health settings (Heritage 1998; Thompson, 1998; Balfour, 2004; Hughes, 2003; Hughes, 2005, Thorpe, 2017). A considerable weight of evidence points to the benefits of drama in supporting self-esteem, communication skills, self-awareness and teamwork, providing opportunities for enjoyment, and gaining audience affirmation (Maruna and LeBel, 2006, Arts Alliance, 2010, Parkes and Bilby, 2010). In general it is argued that the skills acquired in the course of participative theatre are transferable to other situations. When considering impact on offending behavior, the Arts Alliance, a national network that supports the arts in criminal justice settings, maintains that "the arts produce exactly the skills and the common humanity that offenders need if they are to be rehabilitated backed in to our communities" (2010, 3).

Other positive outcomes with vulnerable or challenging groups have included improvement of relationships between participants, and development of trust (Buchleitner, 2010), particularly significant in volatile environments such as prison (see Heritage, 2004). Development of self-reflective capacity and coping strategies have also been linked to Forum Theatre. Improvements in self-expression have been noted, with one female prisoner stating "I learnt to talk about myself in front of others without getting embarrassed" and another remarking "I had to do this to see how I was living" (Hughes, 1998, 55). By discussing thoughts and feelings through a fictional Other, participants find a safe space in which to "explore a wider range of self-expression and take on new roles and responsibilities" (Hughes, 2005, 66).

## **A Psychosocial Realist approach**

Our study documents similar findings (Froggett, Manley and Kelly 2018), but our focus here is on *how and why* these change processes occur, and specifically on understanding the often cited 'rehearsal for reality' and 'real-life' issues. Vital in supporting practice developments are theoretical accounts of change that move beyond descriptive outcomes.

Within the available literature, 'Blagg!' is of particular interest. This programme was developed by the theatre organisation TiPP, who train staff in the criminal justice sector to deliver it to offenders (TiPP, 2014). Blagg! uses Forum Theatre to enable participants to explore their criminal behaviour, and has been deployed across the prison and youth custody estates in England and Wales. The programme revolves around a fictional character 'Jo(e) Blagg', an offender, whose life story and offence type is created by the participants (Hughes, 1998). Hughes (1998, 51), who observed the programme with a group of female prisoners, remarks that participants

...enact the offence and its consequences for Jo [the prisoner] and her victim, exploring the thoughts and feelings of the characters involved. The group then creates the series of events that led to Jo committing the offence... Interventions are made by the group as each scene is enacted, taking the form of Jo's attempts to change the course of events. The group suggest and rehearse alternative routes Jo could have taken out of situations.

The developers of Blagg! incorporated cognitive behavioural techniques, to ensure that offending behaviour was problematized and construed as 'wrong'. Thompson (2000, 186) argued that this was important given that "many prisoner groups, particularly young offenders, saw nothing problematic in hitting their partners or stealing cars..."

In cognitive behavioural approaches the emphasis is on addressing faulty thinking, affect regulation and pro-social, solution-focussed strategies for dealing with difficult situations. Odd Arts approach also allows for cognitive re-formulation of moral questions, but this is only one of many strategies used. In contrast to the 'corrective' tendency of cognitive behavioural strategies, psychosocial approaches attempt to understand the lived experiences of participants, according an important role to fantasy<sup>vi</sup>, and to the emotional shifts that occur through enactment. Rather than inferring quality of experience from past behaviours, insight is gained by observing changes in mind-set, expressive repertoire, emotional containment, self-reflectiveness, capacity for empathy and communication skills.

The psychosocial subject is regarded as emotional, defended, desiring, impelled by impulses of which s/he is unconscious, and positioned in a web of relationships and structures which s/he can often barely account for (Hollway and Jefferson 2012 [2000]). Psychosocial practice and research look beyond how people think and act, and seek to understand motivations and behaviours as arising in the interaction between individual biographies and dispositions, and the social environment<sup>vii</sup>. Psychosocial approaches have an affinity with creative and arts-based work in which - as Boal insisted - symbolic and metaphorical capacity are an issue. They have previously been used to consider the role of poetry and creative writing in developing self-reflection and recognition with young people in restorative youth justice contexts (Froggett 2007, Froggett 2008, Froggett et al 2007, Farrier et al 2009)

The participants in the Odd Arts workshops that we observed were vulnerable and had committed offences and/or been victimised. Their educational attainment, life skills, and employment prospects had been impaired and their distressed, deprived or disorganised circumstances, meant that thinking about their life choices, moral responsibility and hopes for the future was inhibited. The module we observed was only five days long and we were unsure whether this would be time enough for reflection or emotional 'working through' of hitherto unexpressed problems in living. We wanted to know whether any changes should be regarded as transitory or incidental effects of learning theatre skills, or a mark of durable transformation. We were also interested in the conditions in which insight and emotional engagement were achieved, and where they were limited.

### **Creative Illusion and Third Space**

The meanings of 'real-life' and 'reality' turned out to be elusive when describing a process that involved role-taking, game-playing and the art of illusion. Throughout his career Boal built on techniques of theatrical realism in the tradition of Stanislavski (1984) which demand that the actor immerse in and identify with the role. Boal assumes that actors draw on their own embodied trace memories to create and vitalise a character. Embodied memory can be

understood through a psychoanalytically informed depth psychology (Clarke and Hoggett 2009) - the point being that emotional experience is not necessarily available to conscious recall, but can be re-enacted in theatre. Work with emotional experience is part of the actor's craft. However, Boal combines Stanislavski's methods with an element more often associated with Brecht in techniques that stop or divert the action, drawing actors and audience into critical dialogue. (Pereira Bezerra 2014). Boal's Forum Theatre aims to engage actors and audience emotionally - drawing them into dramatic narrative - and also intellectually - through a Brechtian distancing from the action. Biographical experiences are invoked to prefigure a liveable future. A psychosocial lens takes in both individual and situation and brings the role of illusion in creative living (Winnicott 1971), into dialogue with drama and performance (Rustin and Rustin 2002). By observing the modules, we hoped to move beyond the identification of learning outcomes to see how creative imagination is invoked in 'rehearsal for reality' and how relational and communication skills might themselves change participants' view of the reality they would confront in a future beyond care or incarceration. We also wanted to understand whether Odd Arts' work supports a case for inventive methods of engagement in the rehabilitation of offenders and young people.

While in exile in Europe, Boal incorporated techniques aimed at internalised oppression, rather than oppression arising predominantly from political or social circumstances. This turn towards subjectivity found expression in the *Rainbow of Desire* (1995). Later, in the *Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (2006) Boal clarified aspects of theatrical aesthetics that expand metaphorical and symbolic capacity and bear on actors' perceptions of themselves and their situation, including their ability to express themselves with authenticity. He increasingly emphasised enactment of 'inner' change and situational change within what we here designate as the 'third space' of theatre. Third space refers neither to immutable objective conditions, nor to the 'internal' mental space of unconstrained fantasy, but an arena 'in-between' where playing with what is imagined and what exists allows one to see how things might be different.

While we denote theatrical space as third space, it is also the context for what Winnicott (1971) described as 'transitional' psychic space - a 'third area of experiencing' where questions of interiority/exteriority or subjectivity/objectivity are suspended in the play of creative illusion. According to Winnicott, transitional space first arises in the play of infants as they discover a world through selected transitional objects (the teddy bear or comfort blanket) that are perceived as an extension of the infant, existing *for* the infant, *and* as having an independent existence as objects *in themselves*. It is through this dual nature of the transitional object that narcissism attenuates as the infant learns to negotiate an internal world of fantasy objects that appear to be 'inner' experience *and* the 'not-me' world of objects with a quality of externality. This depends on maintaining a space in which the indeterminacy of 'me' and 'not me' never has to be resolved

The transitional space is one in which we must never ask "did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?" The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated (Winnicott 1971, 12).

The capacity for illusion develops in the interplay between fantasy and reality and this is elaborated over time - for example in make-believe play and later in adult drama where the boundaries between player and role are temporarily suspended.

There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from

playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences" (Winnicott, 1971, 51).

Rehearsal involves a dynamic tension between will/desire and reluctance, posing the question 'what does the character want?' as s/he navigates the territory between what appear to be inner impulsion and external constraint (Baraitser and Bayly 2001).

For the individuals in our study whose freedom was constrained by limited opportunities and intensive surveillance, a capacity for creative illusion (Hoggett, 2000) offers a psychological precursor to changing circumstances. The ability to use third space and transitional space holds out promise of 'creative living' (Winnicott 1971) as opposed to the acting out of destructive impulses. It is this that makes it possible, in a short drama workshop, to re-figure participants' understanding of their 'reality'.

### **The study**

The Forum Theatre module was delivered in four settings part of an education programme. It was not profiled as 'therapy', or 'rehabilitation', or related to court disposals. In a previous Odd Arts project, 'Intermix', education staff noted long-term improvements in academic performance, motivation, attendance, and completion rates (for similar findings in other projects, see Hughes 2005, Anderson et al 2011). An important aspect of this success was thought to be increased learner voice with respect to concerns around refuge, hate-crime, child sexual exploitation, legal highs and homelessness – topics that are difficult to broach in conventional educational settings. Learner voice was also the object of attention in the creative leadership workshops with the aim using the creative arts to increase self-awareness, confidence and communication and also the relational skills that would enhance employability.<sup>viii</sup>

#### *Participants and Settings*

The four venues where the forum theatre module was delivered offered interesting contrasts. The first that we visited was an educational facility for young people of both genders from 14+, not in mainstream education, employment or training (NEET Learners as they are known in the sector). It was located in a rather run-down area of a Northern English City. The average group size was six, the young people were free to come and go and composition fluctuated for a variety of reasons, some more 'legitimate' than others. The practical difficulty for Odd Arts was containing this chaotic and distractible group long enough to work with them.

By contrast Care 4 Children, Hope House, Preston offered intensive surveillance for young offenders with complex needs. Their high risk behaviours prior to care were connected with gang culture. The group consisted of four males aged 13 to 17 (of African Caribbean and East European backgrounds); two attended all five sessions, one attended four sessions, and one attended the final two sessions. The group was lively, and mostly engaged, but prone to acting out and with a short attention span. Teaching and care staff were in attendance.

Care 4 Children, Jefferson House, Winsford was different again – a care setting for young people with complex needs in which the group consisted of four white British males, aged between 15 and 17, who had been involved in sexually inappropriate behaviour and/or serious sexual offences, and had experienced sexual victimisation. All four participants attended all sessions and they were courteous and compliant. As we shall see this was not

quite the advantage that it at first appeared. High staff surveillance ensured that the young people attended all the sessions.

Finally HMP Wymott, Leyland is a Category C prison that includes a wing for vulnerable male prisoners (VP's) many of whom are sex offenders. Two groups were run: one was for VP's ages 30-75; another for Category C male offenders, average age 30. Security restrictions at the prison meant that not all prisoners attended all sessions, however, overall the participation was fairly consistent.

## **Research Methods**

Psychosocial research always combines a focus on individuals or groups with an understanding of social setting and wider environment (Hollway 2008). It proceeds from an ontology of defended or conflicted subjectivity where subjects are not transparent to themselves and research analysis incorporates depth reflexivity (Clarke 2006; Clarke and Hoggett 2009). Our approach is not to 'diagnose' or analyse individuals, but to understand dimensions of their situation which cannot easily be spoken of. It is attuned, therefore, to what is half-formed and emergent in social space.

### *Observations, Video-recording and Process Recording.<sup>ix</sup>*

Our primary method was non-participatory observation through a psychosocial lens (Hinshelwood and Skogstad 2002), although we joined in games occasionally when invited, in order to naturalise our presence. In the first two settings we introduced participants to a fixed video-camera. Video-recording can arouse anxieties about confidentiality and disclosure but the young people were mostly unconcerned and lost interest in the camera almost immediately. The video-recording allowed us re-visit the workshops in analysis, the better to understand micro-interactions and group dynamics.

Video-recording was prohibited at Jefferson House and HMP Wymott. However, by then we were familiar with the workshop format so that hand-written process recording could easily capture the dynamics of sessions. Notes were written up and distributed among the research team as soon as practicable after each workshop, providing 'experience near' commentary on researchers' reactions to what they had seen and heard (Froggett and Briggs 2012).

### *Action research framework*

Formative evaluation was combined with iterative feedback and review with Odd Arts, who implemented changes in the course of the programme. For example, when we observed that the use of a workbook at the end of each session was ill-received this was changed to a more inventive graphic format. Full feed-back sessions lasted two to three hours and were emotionally demanding insofar as the work was closely scrutinised, particularly elements that had not worked as intended. In addition there were numerous de-briefs, both in person and by telephone. Odd Arts have continued to translate the learning from the research process into their ongoing work.

All feedback and recommendations were evolved in dialogue so that staff could refine the model and its impact. While conducting sessions they had to think on their feet, innovate

and adapt to unanticipated material presented by participants. The research offered an opportunity for them to articulate what they were doing and why; to reflect upon particular strategies and on the psychosocial processes that unfolded during each session.

### *Reflexivity*

The research team were two women and one man, with academic and professional backgrounds that included psychosocial studies, arts and humanities, criminology, education and social work. Our diverse disciplinary lenses implied different understandings of risk, responsibility and repair attached, for example, to gang-related aggression, sexual violence, and hopelessness and depression. Each researcher responded with varying degrees of empathy and emotional distance to individuals in the workshops, which we recorded in our notebooks. We challenged and negotiated with one another in interpreting the material, conducting analysis as a panel and identifying individual dispositions as a safeguard against over-interpretation. This gave us licence to be fully engaged – delighted, intrigued, perturbed or moved. Researcher identifications were the object of critically reflexive scrutiny.

*Participants split into two groups, to each come up with two truths about themselves, to write them down and then to mix them up and get the other team to work them out. This task was really successful – and was really enjoyable to watch [‘Participants are much much more engaged this week’]. I was watching one of the facilitators and I could see that there was a bond between her and X (‘that’s a really good one’), who was much more comfortable with her this week. This task was funny as her team picked very light-hearted facts, whereas the other team were very intense; one of W’s facts was that he had been stabbed; X kidnapped, and Y shot. I was shocked by this, even though I knew that they had troubled lives; it made me sad to think that such young people, with such potential, had been through such things. (Observation Notes: Hope House)*

### *Data Analysis*

We worked individually with the data selecting extracts from the videos and notebooks for the intensive panel analysis where they presented a puzzle or provocation or seemed emblematic. Panels included researchers who had been present (we usually attended the workshops in pairs) and those who had not, allowing ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives on the data. We generated hypotheses on why and how particular exercises and games had clearly engaged and stimulated participants, comparing them with those that had not. Data were interrogated substantively and performatively (what participants said and did, and how they said and did it). Then we sought explanations as to why participants responded as they did, testing our hypotheses by iteratively returning to the data. In formulating these explanations we considered context specific issues for each group. We had very little biographical information as Odd Arts prefer to approach participants without preconceptions. However, the dramatic scenarios in every case but one (discussed below) offered windows on their lifeworlds and mind-sets.

In identifying substantive, performative and contextual/explanatory dimensions of data we were adapting the Dubrovnik depth-hermeneutic interpretation group method which relates what is embodied and enacted to what is verbalised, so opening up unconscious dynamics in a text (Salling Olesen and Weber 2012). In drama, performative elements acquire particular

weight, but so does the substance of what groups choose to present – or avoid presenting (as we shall see in Jefferson House).

### **Third Space, Restorative Practice and 'Feeling Real'.**

Odd Arts maintain a focus on subjective experience, self-awareness, development of relationships and empathy with others as precursors to behavioural change. While the scope to change circumstances is limited in care and custodial settings, the potential to identify internalised oppression ('the cop in the head' as Boal called it, (Boal and Epstein 1990)) is significant. Both young people and prisoners in this study were initially diffident but Odd Arts' programmes entail a move from disengagement into enactment. Their intention is that a sense of authenticity - which we describe as 'feeling real' - develops through the drama. <sup>x</sup> It is this that allows participants to become authors of their own actions and see themselves through the eyes of others. Conflicts of interest then no longer appear as zero sum games of the individual at war with his/her environment where personal triumph involves the opponent's symbolic annihilation. If this learning is consolidated, participants will be less inclined to destructive behaviours where the self's survival requires the other's subjugation (Benjamin 2004). The perpetrator/victim binary is often a default position in offender thinking, supported by the shaming and blaming cultures of retributive justice. It is associated with projective mechanisms whereby the least tolerable aspects of the self are lodged in the other where they become target of the subject's own passive or active aggression. For young people like the NEET learners, the risk is internalisation of 'failure' leading to rebellious rejection of formal learning, or else a lapse into 'learned helplessness' (Seligman 1972), or depression. We witnessed all three modes in the same small workshops.

In the following example, a participant externalises his own sense of failure by projecting it into role in the third space of performance:

*When B turns up, he is apparently suffering from a massive hangover and refuses to join the group, instead he sits behind me. Without blame or judgement, [the facilitators] engage with him from the front of the 'room'. And he shouts back from behind me....B takes on the role of the person interviewing someone who wants a job caring for children. This person has had her drinks spiked the day before and her mind can hardly function. B is seen (ironically, but also appropriately) asking her if she has been drinking and telling her about the consequences of drinking and taking drugs - that she won't get the job with children. In doing so, he is almost speaking to himself, since he is the one with the real hangover. He doesn't limit himself to reading the questions from the interview that have been prepared on a sheet of paper beforehand - he tells the facilitator that he was too smashed to remember anything - he actually gets into the part and improvises lines, especially about the dangers of drink interfering with a future career.*

(Observation notes: Education and Training Facility)

In line with the principles of restorative practice (Zehr and Toews 2004), this is a theatre of dilemmas and choices. In restorative practice there is an orientation towards self-understanding and of re-constitution of relationships – with individuals and communities damaged through attacks on their values, persons or property, and with a wider society whose moral and juridical order has been compromised. Pathways to restoration are situation specific, depending on three-way negotiation between victim, offender and community. B. becomes the community voice that advises the 'real B' through acting.

Whereas a formal restorative justice conference would 'stage' this negotiation, all forms of restorative practice accept its premises. A psychosocial perspective emphasises how the three way encounter produces 'thirdness' in real relationships which transcend the polarisations of 'doer' and 'done to' (Benjamin 2004; Froggett 2008). The aim is to develop the capacity to perceive self and other from a third point of view (Britton 1998) so affording a new perspective. This finding of a third position, and development of third position thinking, is at the heart of many of the exercises, games and role plays in Odd Arts workshops. The audience participation enabled by Forum Theatre then stages thirdness in the final performance underlining the message that outcomes of human interaction are never foreclosed, scenarios can always be re-imagined, the audience/community can be a trusted interlocutor and reality is never as intractable as it appears.

*As the character at the centre of the drama developed it was clear that felt emotional experiences and moral dilemmas were being projected into this role; problems related to peer pressure, drugs and alcohol and poor family relationships. This allowed participants to consider the character's situation from the 'inside' (through identification) and from the 'outside' (through evaluation and reflection). They were then able to think about his prospects from a third position and consider the decisions he/they could make to take charge of the course of events - the boys avoided the rush into easy stereotypical judgements that authority figures might have liked to hear, and instead producing a character enmeshed in social pressures but with an 'interior life' relationships, commitments and moral dilemmas – a character capable of 'feeling real'.  
(Observation notes: Hope House)*

### **Performance and Rehearsal for Reality**

We were struck by the energy and care invested in final performances, and by extension in the audiences who were held in mind throughout. Symbolically, the final event signalled a turning towards a wider 'reality' after the protected space of the rehearsal room – and since the dramatic action always involved a moral dilemma (by consensual design of the actor-participants) the audience occupied the third position of 'community' who could witness and arbitrate the dilemma.

*The Category C prisoners in Wymott staged the temptations and hazards of drug dealing to meet legitimate demands of a family caught up in blackmail when the small-time dealer, having succumbed to the pleas of his 'customers' for deferred payment, fails to pay his suppliers. There were complex layers of choice, responsibility, entrapment, coercion, ingratiation and desperation in this short drama. The story 'struck home' - underlined by 'performance anxiety'. Thirty or so prisoners and the Governor watched. Their life experiences 'hung in the air' freighting the play with a sense of reality. The resonating audience gave relief - without disavowing the predicament.  
(Observation notes: HMC Wymott)*

Baraitser and Bayly (2001) point out that the audience is always present as an expectation that legitimises the anticipation of rehearsal - so that it becomes a 'playing for real'. The final drama was always approached with seriousness and anxiety - the imagined audience was cared for and feared. In Hope House the rehearsals allowed the boys to develop their rap skills, combining rhythmic vitality of the music with the lurid misogyny of the lyrics, but before performing, the words were made 'radio friendly' without prompting by the

facilitators. The boys had learnt from older men, in the context of glamorised gang culture, celebrated through public acclamation of celebrity rappers, who sometimes legitimise its sexism and aggression, but the rehearsal process had generated this capacity for discrimination.

Baraitser and Bayly (2001) draw attention to the rehearsal as a transitional space (Winnicott 1971) belonging neither to 'real lives', nor to dramatic fiction. It hovers somewhere in-between as the players project parts of themselves into roles and scenes and the emergent performance is aesthetically crafted so that it communicates what feels real. The actor-participants discover what is and is not under their control as they struggle with their material.

In reaching out to the 'audience-in-the-mind' the participants create a third – a transformed rap that is symbolically 'of themselves' (containing their experience) yet 'for others' (adapted in deference to their imagined feelings). If it is to be performed with vitality and yet connect with others, it must feel real to the actor-participants and acceptable to the audience-community. In investing this new version with authenticity they are struggling with the seductions of gangsta-rap and their feelings about it, while offering it to others. Benjamin (2004) would describe this interaction as a recognition process which occurs through the production of energetic, moral and symbolic thirds that bridge the gap between the parties: the energetic third is in the rhythmic articulation of embodied sensation that gives expression to the feeling of black street culture for young men seeking community. The symbolic third is in the ideation, language and aesthetic of the rap as it contains feeling in structured and disciplined form. The moral third arises in its adaptation when it is transformed into a gift that others can share.

### **Authenticity and False Self Performance**

In Jefferson House the all-male group was in care because of sexually inappropriate behaviour and/or serious sexual offences. Unlike the other groups (the training facility was chaotic, Hope House easily bored and impulsive) the residents of Jefferson House were punctual, well turned out, respectful and compliant. In line with Odd Arts' usual practice, no personal information was requested or imparted. The expectation was that sexual conduct would not be broached, nor was it alluded to by the participants. Sexual victimisation and offending were present as the 'elephant in the room' that never broke cover.

The social anxiety surrounding minors who commit sexual offences is acute and we do not know how these young people internalise or disavow this anxiety, but in the workshops the subject appeared taboo and some of the work felt inauthentic with plot lines imported from TV.

*Creating the character for the performance had been brilliant at Hope House as participants had entered the 'third space'; and the character had ended up being very similar to T. However, this cohort did not really utilise the 'third space'; instead picking themes from Eastenders etc*  
(Observation notes: Jefferson House)

Some intertwining of real and fictional life problems must have maintained participants' engagement, but the collusive silence on sexual behaviour would inevitably have conveyed

that their actions were unspeakable - 'censored' from the drama. The aspect of Forum Theatre that depends on a fictionalised enactment of real problems in transitional space could not be staged. (Yet one of the parents who went to see the final performance was able to speak frankly about her son's sexual offences.) The risk here is that an atmosphere of secretive non-disclosure is unintentionally created by default – one of the central features of sexual victimisation and offending. In the absence of its acknowledgement, discomfort pervades the room. Our observer recalled the unease she felt at a game in rehearsal that innocently involved physical touching, without being able to resolve whether or not the exercise was justified. The danger is that suspicion and mistrust seeps into the environment surrounding these young people at every turn, undermining the opportunity to work effectively with them. In this case an opportunity lost was the performance as 'container' for the expression of otherwise repressed thoughts.

By the end of the module the respectfulness that had initially seemed to offer favourable conditions for learning had taken on a different hue which rather than 'feeling real' we understand as a 'false self' construction (Winnicott 1971). The false self, according to Winnicott, develops early among children from over-controlling environments, where the need to adapt to gain adult approval results in compliant behaviour that masks impulses and desires felt to be unacceptable. This is by no means an intentional dissimulation, rather it is an unconscious abnegation of true self felt to be in need of protection from exposure - a defence against the anxiety of being fundamentally unworthy of love and regard. False self behaviour is not only compliant, it is performatively accomplished but unwittingly weaves a web of furtiveness. In this situation the participants were in double jeopardy. To the extent that they limited their use of the sessions (by resorting to second hand plot lines), their own spontaneous creativity would have appeared (unconsciously) 'deficient' to themselves and others, while their 'false self' presentation was consolidated in a theatrical performance of this 'reality'.

## **Conclusions**

We have taken our cue from Augusto Boal's claim that Forum Theatre is a rehearsal for reality and have explored the role of creative illusion expressed through fictionalisation of real-life issues in re-figuring reality for groups whose prospects were limited. In doing so we have highlighted Winnicott's account of what it is to feel real, which he considered to be the pre-condition for creative living. We have taken this to mean the ability to become the responsible author of one's own actions, capable of spontaneity, originality and yet with the capacity to empathise with another's point of view and to see one's own behaviour from the other's perspective (which also happens to be key to restorative practice). This has been described as the ability to occupy a third position between self and other by using third space - a form of transitional space, actualised in the theatre setting. In this space instrumental questions of what the activity is for, or what has been learnt and to what end, are temporarily suspended. Indeed a measure of the strength of the approach may be its ability to establish and maintain a **potential** space in the teeth of instrumental demands. With the use of the workbooks we witnessed its momentary collapse under the weight of assumed accreditation imperatives.

Forum Theatre as adapted by Odd Arts can help participants negotiate imagination and reality. Our study has been a form of realist psychosocial inquiry in which behaviours and mind-sets are always situationally complex, dynamic and contextualised. In this study they were observable through enactments in a theatre setting and we have shown why the same facilitation techniques worked differently for particular groups according to their

circumstances. Our approach has allowed for the fact that motivations are often ambivalent and conflicted. We see something different by watching people struggle with choices and dilemmas in a dramatized scenario to what we learn by asking them to give an account of their actions and motivations. In the case of people who have not thrived in education and training, this can impose a burden of self-justification in a situation of powerlessness and disadvantage, compounded by the urge to say what authority figures and custodians might like to hear. Paradoxically, then, the dramatic fictionalisation of dilemmas drawn from life experience can feel more real than straightforward accounts of how and why things are said and done.

In our view, it is because of this – and the opportunity to achieve an authentic performance of the self - that Forum Theatre workshops, with their combination of immersion, critical distance and re-figuration of scenarios by an audience, hold out the promise of durable change. The groups we observed were effectively sequestered from what passes for reality in special educational programmes or in highly supervised, semi-secure or custodial settings. The experience of ‘feeling real’, staged through drama offered an opportunity to play with the many sides of the self and of human relationships through assuming roles and working through life issues with others before reflecting on the process. Where this did not take place – because the ‘unspeakability’ of abusive sexualised behaviour invaded the transitional space - we witnessed the deadening conformity of false self-compliance which limited the development of the third space of drama.

Where the third space was held open we offered a psychosocial explanation of the effectiveness of Odd Arts’ work especially in the rehearsal process that involves negotiation and collaboration with others; a tension between opportunity and constraint in developing a character; and in the high ‘playing for real’ stakes of exposing one’s attempts at resolution to an audience. This, as it happens enhances relational, reflective and communicative skills though to present these as primary goals in the course of the workshop would have compromised the intense emotional and imaginative engagement of the participants.

We cannot confirm without follow up research how long any of the changes wrought by these workshops last. However, we can posit that if the process not only enables authenticity, but consolidates it through the recognition offered by an audience, then this is a powerful and possibly enduring experience, that will remain with participants. They were pleased enough to receive their certificates at the end of the module attesting to skills they had acquired, but this was a minor satisfaction compared with their pleasure in a shared creation. A more significant but fundamentally unmeasurable outcome would be that through an expanded self-awareness they might seek out ways to re-produce the fictionalised truth of drama in a world beyond the limits of care and custody. The implications are that workshops of this nature should include a follow up or further consolidation phase after an appropriate lapse of time. At the time of writing this strategy is being designed into Odd Arts future programmes.

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<sup>i</sup> Artists and arts organisations have not bowed altogether quietly to this demand See Holden (2005) and Walmsley and Oliver (2011) for a overview of the debate

<sup>ii</sup> The study was undertaken by the Psychosocial Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire. The final report to the funding body demonstrates that the experience of teamwork and self-awareness acquired through the course is likely to be invaluable in helping participants insert themselves into the world of work  
<http://clou.uclan.ac.uk/21735/1/Creative%20Leadership%20Project%2C%20Final%20Evaluation%20Report%20o10218.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.oddarts.co.uk>

<sup>iv</sup> Realist research and evaluation strategies aim at a situated understanding of research subjects, as formed by and acting upon their environment. Motivations and actions are not assumed to be transparent to either research participants or researchers.

<sup>v</sup> TiPP was set up in 1992, to provide theatre based programmes to the Probation and Prison Services

<sup>vi</sup> Both fantasy - conscious use of imagination and unconscious phantasy are implicated in acting and enactment.

<sup>vii</sup> See Froggett (2012) in Becker et al (2012) for an expanded definition using research with young offenders as illustration.

<sup>viii</sup> Participants were prepared for ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) Level 1 award in Peer Mentoring (<https://www.asdan.org.uk>).

<sup>ix</sup> The study was approved by the PsySoc Ethics Committee at the University of Central Lancashire. Individuals in all settings were free to opt in or out of the rehearsal and performance activities, and only participated with the active consent that is indispensable to creative activity. Confidentiality is limited in any group based activity, especially where a semi-public performance is at stake. Here the fictionalisation of problems in living explored in the workshops and their expression through a third (the composite character created by the group) somewhat mitigated self-disclosure.

<sup>x</sup> Winnicott's idea of feeling real is a basis for what is commonly regarded as authenticity, registered as a feeling of 'aliveness' spontaneity and originality (Winnicott 1971)