

STAGING CLEVELAND

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

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The Therapeutic Value of Theater

By: Christopher Johnston



1900 Superior Ave.
Suite 130
Cleveland, OH 44114
www.cultureforward.org
216.575.0331

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SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

In the same way a play can profoundly influence audience members, leave them emotionally moved or even drained, it can have a powerful effect on a person struggling with personal or emotional challenges, addiction or even serious community issues. That's why drama or theater projects are often used therapeutically, and Cleveland has a number of programs that are designed to help different populations, including people with drug and alcohol addictions, HIV/AIDS patients, and even women serving time in prison.

The latter program, known as ARC for Artist Rehabilitation Coalition, was founded by Equity actress Lara Mielcarek at the Northeast Reintegration Center in Cleveland in the spring of 2016. The seasoned professional actress learned how to design an effective Shakespeare in Prison program while working with Phyllis Gorfain, an emeritus professor of English at Oberlin College, who runs the Oberlin Drama at Grafton team that teaches Shakespeare in the Grafton Correctional Institution.

Under Mielcarek and her assistants' direction, the women study acting techniques and scenes throughout the course, and by the end, they perform an entire play. Taking on the complex challenges of Shakespeare starts the participants on a level playing field, Mielcarek says: "They don't even know what they're saying, so we're down to sounds and story and super basic elements, so there's no way for them to be overconfident coming in."

She adds, however, that she sees a number of benefits that arise for the inmates, starting with an enhanced vocabulary because of the rich language of the Bard's dialogue. They also literally find their voice. "They need to use so much of their facial musculature for the first time, and they need to be heard," Mielcarek explains. "So suddenly, someone who was mumbling and hard to understand on day one after just a couple of months gains confidence in her voice, speaking publicly and ability to express herself."

As actors, Mielcarek adds, they learn how to actively listen and remain engaged throughout a scene, even if they have few or no lines. They get to tap into their ability to imagine and create, and most important, the class allows them to not be inmates for a couple of hours.

SPEEDING UP RECOVERY

For the past 15 years, Cleveland Public Theatre has run the Y-Haven program for recovering chemical and alcohol abusers. Currently directed by Adam Seeholzer, the program starts with a workshop with more than 50 men who are Y-Haven (YMCA) transitional housing and treatment residents. Over the course of several months, they write a play together, and then 14 of the men are cast into the play. They then perform that play at CPT and throughout the community.

“One of the most striking things the Y-Haven counselors report back to us is that they see a dramatic speeding up of the recovery process in the men who participate,” says Raymond Bobgan executive artistic director at CPT. “When the men are on the street and finally hit their bottom point, then go into detoxification and recovery, it can take between three to six months before they start behaving like a normal functioning person, but participants of the program return to normal functioning more quickly.”

Bobgan emphasizes that they do not consider the program “drama therapy,” since no one involved is specifically trained in the field. The approach they take, as they do with all of their community-focused theater projects, is to treat all of the participants as artists with whom they are collaborating on a play. “There’s a real sense that I’m not a therapist or a do-gooder,” he explains. “We’re going into this because we’re artists, and we see these men as artists we’re going to work together with, so we’re going to gain as much from this as they are.”

THIS IS NOT A THERAPY SESSION

During a performance of a Theater Ninjas play, *The Excavation*, at the Cleveland Museum of Art, actor/playwright Ray Caspio realized some people find catharsis in telling the stories of their personal problems. His character offered to tour the museum with audience members who wanted to join him. Along the way, some of them started revealing intimate, personal stories to him of abuse they had suffered, for example.

That experience inspired him to develop The Art of Storytelling project with CMA. Caspio has been teaching the course for the past three years. Then he got involved with MetroHealth System’s Art and Medicine program, teaching simple theater exercises to patients suffering from brain injuries or strokes. He won a Creative Workforce Fellowship and used the financial support to develop a storytelling program for people with HIV/AIDS. Participants meet once a week for four weeks to prepare and rehearse their personal stories that they then tell at a public event at CMA.

“I make it clear that this is not therapy session,” Caspio says. “The stories should be personal experiences they’ve had, perhaps about their diagnosis. I’m not looking for a lecture or to be entertained.”

He will continue the program for different patient populations. The next planned is for people with opioid addictions, and it will be open to patients, family members, doctors, etc. His goal for the participants?

“I hope that it empowers them and shows them their voice matters, that they feel their story is significant and worth telling,” he says. “I hope getting their story out there empowers them and they share in a way where an audience member will feel comfortable coming up to them after the performance to ask a question or reveal they’ve been through it, too.”

THE BEAUTY OF PSYCHODRAMA

Connie Lawrence, LISW-S, first developed her psychodrama program, *Women in Recovery*, for the Northeast Reintegration Center in 2012. The program incorporates guided dramatic scenes, art, music, improv theater games and group- and community-building activities as therapeutic modalities. She later implemented the program for clients of the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center, and she now uses it in her job as Senior Staff Therapist at Luna Living Recovery Center, a substance abuse treatment facility in Chagrin Falls.

With psychodrama, the person reverses roles. In other words, one exercise has people think of a late loved one and ask if there is something they would like to say to them. They then play the person and give what they think their response would have been.

“It’s a guided dramatic action to resolve something that is unfinished material in a person’s life,” Lawrence explains. “So the beauty of psychodrama is the person gets to complete the material, and their body almost feels like it really happened, so there’s a real sense of completion and wholeness the person gets to enact, even in a small vignette.”

As part of a larger detox and recovery program, she adds, her psychodrama activities have helped enhance Luna’s treatment efforts, which now record a 70% success rate over a 90-day period, as indicated in a recent clinical trial.

After she first experienced psychodrama as a client in the business world, Lawrence was so impressed, she returned to school to earn her master’s degree in social work at Cleveland State University in 2009. She did her psychodrama certification training independently, and then started the Cleveland Psychodrama Institute, where she still occasionally offers training sessions.

FUTURE DOCTORS

Working with first- and second-year medical students at the Cleveland Clinic’s Lerner College of Medicine, Katherine Burke employs theater in several different applications. For example, one is for a program called Devising Healthy Communities. The community engagement project brings artists and Cleveland residents and organizations together with medical students to artistically explore topics such as social cohesion or health and well-being.

“That’s one project we have that develops relationships between communities and organizations and future doctors,” Burke says.

She also uses theater to complement the reflective writing medical students do throughout the five-year, entirely case-based curriculum. For a project known as The Good Doctor, students explore through poetry, literature and other humanities what it means to become a doctor and then be a good doctor. Students use writing to reflect on who they are becoming individually as future doctors.

Next, Burke takes those essays and arranges them into scenes and theatrical performances. That provides the students with several chances to reflect on the topic: once while they’re writing their essay, once with a small discussion group of eight led by a physician, and once during the theatrical adaptations of their writings and the discussion afterward.

“They get three opportunities to reflect deeply on their becoming a doctor or whatever the writing prompt may be,” says Burke, who earned her MFA in Acting at Purdue University in 1999. “That’s really the goal.”