

Breaking down barriers and uniting people through Art

Introduction

The project I will be describing shows how theatre and drama can promote understanding and appreciation of people with disabilities. Through the medium of dramatic improvisation, school children and university students interacted with young people with disabilities (mostly Down syndrome). Having a common aim, to produce a piece of theatre, both groups were able to work together and provide mutual support and encouragement. The outcome of the project was that children and young people were able to form a much more realistic picture of the individual with learning difficulties.

Although a great deal is now being done in Greece to help those with disabilities, there is still a tendency to segregate them from the rest of society. This has led to ignorance and prejudice, resulting in the unequal treatment of people with disabilities. The aim of this project, which is on-going, is to make some progress towards making young people aware of the talents and abilities of people with disabilities. People tend to shy away from the unknown, the strange or the unusual. By bringing young people and people with disabilities together in a collaborative project, barriers are broken down and misunderstandings revealed.

Peter Slade (1995) was the first to use the term Dramatherapy in his application of drama and role play for remedial purposes in special education, as far back as 1964. As a dramatherapist and teacher in special education, I saw the potential for using drama and role play to create an environment in which children and young people can work and play with people with disabilities in a natural and creative way. Dramatherapy techniques were used to help the members of the larger group become acquainted and to promote creative interaction. This is not a Dramatherapy case study, but an attempt to show how drama and music constituted the common ground between two different groups of young people, who were able to share a mutually beneficial experience. Art was the means by which a channel of communication was established between the groups.

The project began at a primary school, which was visited by a group of young actors with developmental difficulties. The rationale behind these visits to schools was that art, though often expressing a specific cultural, social and individual point of view, can cross borders. It can speak a universal language and overcome barriers of intellect, education and social background. The majority of art forms, though having specific cultural origins, have a universal appeal, which can be appreciated in different ways and on different intellectual levels. They can often express what cannot be expressed in words or which words alone are not enough to express. Furthermore, in the case of music and the visual arts, they are not lexically bound. Therefore, regardless of intellectual ability and background, all art forms help us to experience life in a variety of different ways. As a result, communication is made possible through the lingua franca of art. The art itself becomes the language of communication. Robbins (1987) mentions that through art ideas and communication take on a tangible form and come to life.

The British Association of Dramatherapists(1992) has adopted the following definition of Dramatherapy:

‘Dramatherapy has as its main focus the intentional use of healing aspects of drama and theatre as the therapeutic process. It is a method of working and playing that uses action methods to facilitate creativity, imagination, learning, insight and growth.’

The project we undertook may not have had the healing of individuals as its goal. However, what it did aim to do was to bring about a form of social ‘healing’. In a healthy society, all sections of that society should interact and cooperate on an equal basis without inhibition or discrimination. A society where this does not happen is a society in need of healing. By working and playing through action methods that facilitated creativity, imagination, learning, insight and growth, it was hoped that this project would bring about a form of social healing, whereby two groups which would otherwise have not come into contact, at least in a creative way, could work and play together.

These workshops were carried out under the auspices of Very Special Arts Hellas (VSA Hellas), whose aim is to make all forms of art accessible to people with disabilities. As a founder member, I have been running the theatre and music group on a voluntary basis, along with a professional musician, for sixteen years.

This music and theatre group has been running since 1993. Since then, the group has grown and there are now twelve permanent members with developmental difficulties together with six volunteers. The volunteers are usually students, who take part both as helpers and as actors, singers or musicians. The group meets one afternoon a week for two hours and puts on one theatrical production a year. The members are from 18 to around 34 years of age. We have staged adaptations of *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Cats*, *The Princess and the Pea*, *Romeo and Juliet* and many others. Our latest was *The Matchmaker* by Thornton Wilder. All these plays were chosen in collaboration with the members, both because they have a strong romantic element, an aspect that appeals to the majority of the members, and also because they could be adapted to accommodate a number of leading roles, so that they all felt equally involved. As some of the participants have speech impediments, songs and music are used to clarify the narrative. The music and lyrics are original. The actors are not required to learn their lines by heart but improvise in keeping with what they have rehearsed. We have singers, percussion instrumentalists, a lighting technician, actors and dancers. The volunteers may help behind the scenes or take part in the production but do not constitute more than 20% of the cast. Some of the participants may play a musical instrument as well as act and sing.

The project, which was subsidized by the Greek General Secretariat for Youth, involved two of our groups, the creative movement group, consisting of young people with and without physical disabilities and the music and theatre group, comprising young people with and without developmental disabilities. This programme included both groups visiting ten Elementary schools in the area of Athens and sharing an experiential artistic workshop with children between 9 and 12 years of age. For our visits to the schools only the six original members, as they were more experienced, and two volunteers, took part.

First visit

In our programme of workshops we made a ‘pilot’ visit to a small private school that caters for children from the age of 4 to 18. On the day of our visit we arrived early and were ushered into the main hall by one of the teachers whose class would be working with us. All the children were in class and we waited for the bell to ring so that we could enter the school’s main hall where the workshop was to take place. We were in small groups talking to each other when a young boy was escorted to the bench next to us with a bandaged leg. He was around eight and was crying quietly. When Eleni, our main drummer, saw him she went and sat next to him. Without saying anything, she also started to cry. The boy was surprised and then it gradually dawned on him that someone was upset for his sake. He quickly stopped crying and told Eleni not to worry because he was feeling better. Eleni then tapped out the rhythm of a popular song on the bench. The group started to sing, which made the boy burst into laughter, even more so when an official came and told us to keep the noise down. So, we had made our first friend before we even began the workshop.

At ten-thirty when the bell rang we went into the main hall and together with 17 boys and girls we sat in a circle. There we shared information about what our group did and how it worked. Together we agreed on the rules for the workshop and then played a name game with a cushion. Then, we stood up, remaining in the circle, and two volunteer children were chosen for our first exercise. The first one gave the end of a rolled up twine to one child who handed it to the person beside him/her and then the next and the next, slowly unwinding the ball. When everyone in the circle was holding the twine tightly the volunteer tied the group into a huge human knot which the second volunteer had to undo without anyone letting go. This exercise brought us all together physically and broke the ice. Other warm-up exercises followed where we encouraged the participants to form small groups or pairs with new partners each time.

For the main part of the workshop, we separated into two, more or less, equal groups, the musicians and the actors. The first group, with the written words and percussion instruments, prepared a well-known pop song and then two of our own songs from the play we were preparing at the time, the ‘The Princess and the Pea’. The second group prepared two scenes from the same play involving three of our members and three or four of the schoolchildren, different ones for each scene. When each group was ready the pop song was first presented and then the first scene was acted out together with the song that accompanied it, followed by the second scene with its song. The plan was for the groups to be reversed, but in this case it was not carried out, as the second group, consisting of boys, was too embarrassed to act. For this reason the exercise was changed, the boys became famous football players and two of our members interviewed them about their latest game. The closure of the workshop involved everyone sitting on the floor in the circle talking about their experience. It ended with the whole group singing a song together.

The success of the workshop is most graphically expressed in a short essay written by a nine-year-old girl after our visit.

“My acquaintance with Very Special Arts”

About two weeks ago, I think, some children with learning difficulties came to our school. My opinion is that they did not have very severe problems, especially Stella who was about 20 years old. With them we played various theatrical games and I had a good time.

I think they also enjoyed themselves with us. What made an impression on me was when playing a game where we had to guess who certain children were impersonating. Amongst the impersonators there was a young man, Giannis, who was impersonating Sakis Rouvas (a famous Greek singer). While he was dancing he did three cart wheels. It was very good. I don't know how to do cart wheels and I thought it was fantastic!

At the end we gave them some juice and they thanked us. We also thanked them for the time they spent with us. I was not very happy when they left because I had had such a good time.

An interesting observation made by the children's teacher was that of the 17 essays written about their experience only three mentioned the fact that their visitors were people with disabilities. The others just talked about a joint workshop with a visiting group of children.

The reaction of the members of our group was also very positive. Some of them had remembered a collaborative project carried out with a group of young people with learning difficulties from the UK, called 'Heart and Soul', and saw it as something similar, i.e. working together with others towards a common aim, to produce a piece of a work of art to be performed in front of a live audience. They felt no difference when working with the two groups.

Following visits

The next three visits were to schools in the centre of Athens where the population of the classrooms were made up of more than 70% immigrant children. This was again a very interesting experience, involving different minority groups working together and learning from one another. Trying to remember the names of children with different nationalities was more difficult, so we introduced music and rhythms for each name. The workshop worked just as well in these schools as it had in the first school. On one occasion, the headmaster took part, which was an added bonus. His participation set a very positive example to the children.

The final school was in an area close to the VSA premises, where we had another very warm welcome by children and staff. In fact, as our production of "The Princes and the Pea" was only a month away, we invited them to come, and were pleasantly surprised when 24 children turned up on a Saturday afternoon of their own free will.

After the first successful year the programme was extended. Having gained experience, we were able to train ten other leaders, some with disabilities themselves. This was followed by 20 more visits to schools all over Attica, involving new groups with other disabilities, plus the old groups. Finally, last year, the two original groups visited two Universities and conducted workshops with musicology students in one case and students of education in the other.

Visits to the Universities

These visits were also very rewarding, the difference being that they did not encourage the feeling of mutual cooperation to the same degree. The students saw our group members as talented children with disabilities, whereas the eight-year-olds had been able to interact more naturally with our group members, often seeing them as adults, as they were physically bigger. The students, however, said they found the workshops very edifying and gained a great deal through interacting with the group. From the music students, four new volunteers emerged, who have been coming regularly to our group.

Communication through the arts

Art combines distance and intimacy, the universal and the individual. It plays an essential role in our survival, in a unique way presenting life in a myriad of ways. Art surpasses natural barriers with the result that the presence and active participation of people with disabilities in groups of schoolchildren does not lead to awkwardness or embarrassment. On the contrary, children have the opportunity to co-exist and observe the different abilities that they discover in themselves and others through the activities of the group. The common experience of participating in a group can constitute the basis of an educational programme to develop skills of integration into groups in general. Laing, when talking about self-consciousness, mentions that as the term is ordinarily used it implies two things: an awareness of oneself by oneself, and an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else's observation. (Laing 1966, 1969). In other words, we do not live in a void. We need people responding to us and to be able to respond to others. The project provided a safe environment where this could take place. Jones also stressed the importance of observing and being observed as part of a therapeutic process. 'The act of witnessing in Dramatherapy is that of being an audience to others or to oneself within a context of personal insight of development.' (Jones 1993, p. 48).

Theatrical play is a microcosm of life with all the elements that comprise it- the joy of living, creating, investigating and learning. It allows a person to combine reality and fantasy, to test him or herself and extend his or her experience beyond the usual rules and roles imposed by age, era and social environment. As societies tend more and more towards high tech, and school curricula put greater emphasis on technology and the physical sciences, it is becoming more and more difficult to convince people of the importance of 'art for our survival'. When creative energy is fulfilled, it becomes a reliable support and provides relief in moments of dejection, paving the way towards health (Hill, 1945). Thus, our workshops had a dual purpose, not only to promote greater understanding of a minority group but also to show that art forms (music and drama in particular) can provide a platform for communication between disparate social groups.

The strong element of play and role-play allows the participants to investigate issues in a tangible yet indirect way. Furthermore, 'play' allows the participant to experiment with behaviours and attitudes, physical postures and body language (Robertson 2007, p. 92). Through play or role-play the participants can be involved in

non-directed 'learning' activities. Thus, much of the process would be unconscious or sub-conscious and therefore less likely to result in inhibitions that might obstruct the dynamic for positive interaction. Jones quoting Jung suggests that the term therapy refers less 'to the question of treatment than of developing the creative possibilities latent in the patient himself' (Jung 211, 1983).

Conclusion

Theatre, music and art in any form are areas which can be taught and enjoyed by all, but at the same time certain innate talents may come to the surface. Storr (1989) maintains that people who realize their creative potential are constantly bridging the gap between the inner and outer. They invest the external world with meaning because they disown neither the world's objectivity nor their own subjectivity. In our theatre and music group we have tried over the years to develop these in each participant so at a workshop or a production their talents are highlighted. This has meant that on our visits to schools, although the children could recognize the Down Syndrome characteristics in some of our members, they could also experience a charismatic actor. They could see a shy girl who may be slow in understanding but given a microphone could sing like a bird. They could admire Anna dancing Greek dances with the grace of a professional. As for our drummer Eleni, when she particularly enjoys a piece of music, she often bursts into tears because she is so moved by the sound she is producing. Being part of and experiencing these workshops, school children were able to come closer to our group. They may have been moved by the fact that some people are disabled but they also came to understand them better and to appreciate that despite their disability they also possess talents worthy of respect and admiration. I shall end with Laing (32, 1969) who said that "our view of others depends on our willingness to enlist all the powers of every aspect of ourselves in the act of comprehension".

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