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Ritual and Body Memory
The Archetypes of Healing –
a Theatre Research Project

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Ritual and Body Memory - The Archetypes of Healing

This paper presents and discusses the results of a multi year theatre research project, in which the relations and implications of ritual and healing have been explored and examined through practical theatre work.

The research project was inspired by the Polish theatre researcher Jerzy Grotowski, who was constantly searching for and working with the archetypal dimensions of theatre.

Jerzy Grotowski's Theatre of Sources

Grotowski and his collaborators worked on source techniques from different cultural backgrounds to test by means of experiment whether these techniques function only on the cultural or symbolic level or whether they are also effective on a purely physiological level. He aimed at finding means “that bring us back to the organic primary experience of life.”

" Grotowski is showing us something which existed in the past but has been forgotten over the centuries. That is, that one of the vehicles which allows man to have access to another level of perception is to be found in the art of performance." (Peter Brook)

Other sources:

- Back to the Origins of Greek Theatre - The Cult of Dionysos

The early Dionysian rituals tried to give active expression to the chaotic forces which are always activated in any transitional phase of life (temenos). Participants reached an altered state known as ek-stasis which enabled the release of powerful emotions (catharsis). That had a purging effect and brings about transformation.

„Dionysos filled their souls with physical and spiritual pleasures and at the same time their souls were purified and exalted to the perfection of a supernatural life”

- Anthropological research in Haiti, India and Mexico to discover other states of ecstasis and the techniques to get into these states.



The „praxis“:

„The Performer is a man of action. He is not somebody who plays another. He is a doer, a priest, a warrior. He is outside aesthetic genres. Ritual is performance, an accomplished action, an act. Performer is a state of being. To the performer, knowledge stands as duty and knowledge is a matter of doing (Jerzy Grotowski, 1990)

All training is unlearning and discovering again. Barefoot - On the back - Beginning again for the first time. An energy is generated through dynamic movement of the body, natural breathing, moving out, knowing the floor and exploring the room and everything in it. The workspace is a landscape, earth, floor, breathe, heartbeat, rhythm, sweat, play, sense and sensuality, present, attentive, still, seeing, waiting, standing. Holding and letting go. Falling in the river. The rush and mix of spontaneous memories, new experiences. Exhaustion. Fresh inspiration... The circulating breath brings greater physical and perceptual stamina. Thus, the work requires commitment to build strength of body and mind. One meets laziness, ineffective habits and techniques. The process is one of eliminating blocks on the path to fulfill one's creative potential.

The Ritual & Healing Project

RITUAL LABORATORY

In the tradition and in recognition of Grotowski's work, the described project focused on developing concrete practical forms of expression and training for body and voice who could facilitate access to very basic and deeply human dimensions that all cultures share.

In order to transfer this approach to an application that would work in (drama-)therapeutical settings today, it was crucial to identify the factors that are significant for an impact/effect that is experienced as "healing".

The initial question was, if and how rituals can be developed by a group (a "collective") in a contemporary context when no external culture specific ritual structures are given.

Going from there further research questions were:

- Does there exist some kind of innate “body knowledge“ (body/action archetypes) that induces ritual structures? Like N. Chomsky’s underlying “deep structures” in the human mind by which the varying “surface structures” of language are generated?
- Do the developed structures resemble ritual actions that had been developed in other cultures (past and present)?
- What physical, psychological and social factors are essential for a “ritual capacity ” of modern human beings who are not integrated in a culture specific ritual context?
- What characterizes ritual experiences that are described as “healing”?

RITUAL - LABATORY - FINDINGS

A typical sequence that –with variations- evolved again and again:

- body-play around the phylo- and ontogenetic “evolution”
- body postures of dominance and submission which turned out to be on the physical level basically a opening to the earth (“grief”) and to the above (“pray/ praise”)
- movements synchronize: coming together
- intense rhythmic movement: “trancing” (ekstasis)
- going “wild”: the masks of Dionysos, “demons” emerge
- the group as “dreaming body”, enacting collective themes, taking care of the wounds of individuals, taking them into the “communitas” – action, to the next level
- the *feeling* or rather the clear perception of “coming home”, in the here and now, in one’s body, in this group - in this world

What is “working” here

and

WHAT IS HEALING?

A Transpersonal Model of the Human Psyche

THE COSMOS – THE ETERNAL



THE COSMOS – THE ETERNAL

So - what is healing??

In the given examples it is

- creating a liminal space
- using ritual structures to synchronize and direct/secure chaotic “psyches”
- transform personal emotions in public/collective expressions
- finding back to/heal the life-force
- finding back to a “clan”
- find a new place in “the world” - in THE GREATER WORLD!
- and a new answer to the question

“WHO AM I”? And who/what is this “I”?

My ritual research in Laos, India, Brazil and Peru led to complete findings.

Application in Dramatherapy

In working

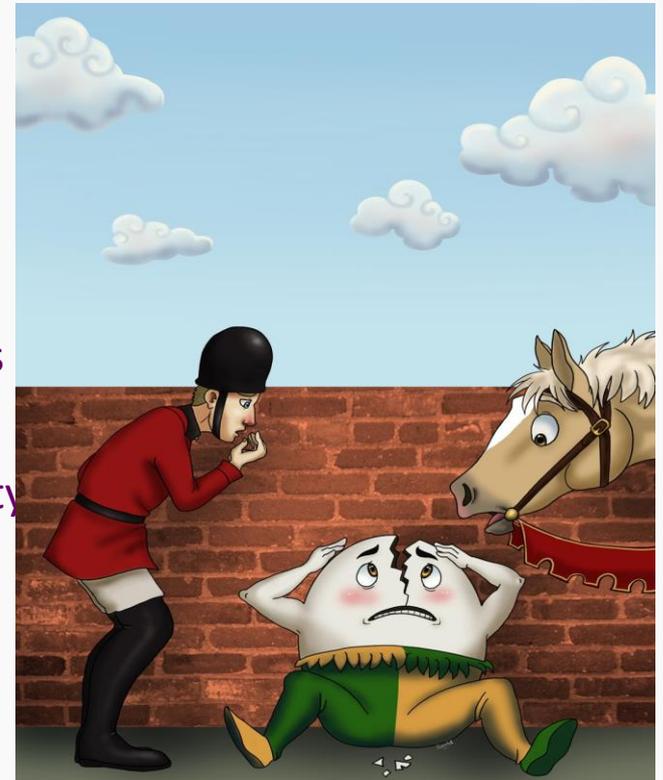
- with alcoholics and drug addicts
- with abused women and other traumatized populations
- with sexual and homicide offenders

these findings had to be adapted.

A Humpty Dumpty Model of Trauma Treatment

- “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
- Humpty Dumpty had a great fall,
- All the King's horses and all the King's men,
- Couldn't put Humpty together again.”

The 2nd law of thermodynamics describes the process of „entropy“, a measure of „disorder“ of a system. After H.D.'s fall and subsequent shattering, the inability to put him together again is representative of this principle: it would be highly unlikely to return him to his earlier state of lower entropy as the entropy of an isolated system never decreases.





Create a space that is safe enough to be dangerous and allows to dance with your demons – and turn them into daimons



How to create such a safe place?

Creating connections:

-to the body and the embodied knowledge about the life-forces - THE PERSONAL

-to a social web (by shared experiences) – THE COLLECTIVE

-to the transpersonal web – THE ETERNAL / COSMIC



What is possible in the room is determined by the relations that are present !

CONCLUSION

The overall purpose of ritual is transformation.

Transformation needs the leap into the unknown and emotional risk
(f.e. the release of blockages and traumata in the body that have kept us in
the shadows)

It needs to uncover and recover who we are,
to discover the true purpose of our lives
and how our life is linked to the cosmos and it's evolution.

In its essence that means to find our role in the great cosmic drama and so to
create a theatre of resilience.

Let's do it!!! NOW!