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The Circus of Myself

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Abstract
The Circus of Myself
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We all tell ourselves stories. We use them to construct our identities and to answer questions about who we are and what we believe. Our self-narratives influence our actions and patterns of behavior. *The Circus of Myself* is a self-written, one-woman show, inspired by the concept that theater can be used as a method of healing both artist and audience. The show filters my own stories and patterns of behavior through archetypal circus characters, in order to create greater awareness of how these characters affect my daily life. My research on drama therapy, and particularly on the work of a theater company called the Mirrors, helped me to develop my piece. I wanted to discover how this type of theater gives performers the opportunity to heal and how it affects an audience. Through my process, I realized that the characters that I developed are part of me, but they are not fully who I am. Now I have a choice whether or not to play them – instead of allowing them constantly to play me. Feedback obtained by way of talkbacks, comment cards, and an email survey provided evidence that this work was meaningful for audiences, as it inspired them to reflect on their personal personas. By performing my cast of circus characters, I allowed people to see themselves more clearly in the mirror of myself.

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The Circus of Myself

1

Theater as Therapy

“Human beings are story tellers by nature” (McAdams 27). We use stories to articulate our sense of individual identity and our belief system, to answer the questions of who we are and what we believe. Our lives are defined by stories and by the ways in which we group them to establish our self-narratives. These narratives then go on to form the basis of the personal myth, which organizes and reconciles all the different, contradictory parts of who we are into what will become our central story, or identity. This myth plays self-defining memories of the past inside our heads all the time, manipulating our perception of the present and shaping our thoughts of the future. It becomes part of our daily lives, both influenced by and influential to our emerging identity. “We do not discover ourselves in myth, we make ourselves through myth. Truth is constructed in the midst of our loving and hating; our tasting, smelling, and feeling; our daily appointments and weekend lovemaking; in conversations we have with those to whom we are closest; and with the stranger we meet on the bus” (McAdams 13). Throughout our lives, our experiences craft our identity and the way in which we look at the world.

As children, we use our imaginations to enter the world of fantasy and play; the world becomes a place of possibility where castles and fairies exist as we pretend that we’re superheroes saving the day. The psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim studied the effect of fairytales on children’s psychological states because “fairytales describe the inner states of the mind by means of images and actions”: he proposed that when a child hears the tale of Cinderella, she would identify with the heroine and go through the emotional journey with the character (Bettelheim 155). Furthermore, since children do not yet have their own stories to define their

world, they use the stories of these fairytale characters to act out how they feel. As evidence, he mentions a five-year old girl, who asked her mother, “Why do you treat me like Cinderella?” because this little girl felt she was constantly being nagged by her mother to clean up when she would rather have been the princess, and perhaps she was also trying to tell her mother indirectly not to be so mean. In childhood, we use stories that we are told to explain who we are and to give meaning to the way things are; however, as we grow up and experience more of our own life encounters, these experiences begin to color our view of the world and why things happen the way they do. As we hit adolescence, we begin to create stories based on our own experience of the world, creating an identity based on what we observe. How do we act in certain situations? Who are we truly? What do we believe in? As we mature, we reflect on our past actions and events and attempt to arrange them into some kind of meaningful order from which we build our evolving identity. James Marcia, a clinical and developmental psychologist, stresses that adolescence is a critical period in the formation of identity:

What is important about identity in adolescence, particularly late adolescence, is that this is the first time that physical development, cognitive skills, and social expectations coincide to enable young persons to sort through and synthesize their childhood identifications in order to construct a viable pathway toward their adulthood. (Marcia 2)

This developmental period is a time filled with exploration and conflict in order to discover who we are and who we are not.

As we become adults, “identity challenges us to construct a personal myth in which a sufficient number of different kinds of characters may emerge, develop and thrive” within our one story (McAdams 118). Each character within the self must play his own part in this story,

using his voice, form, and function to distinguish himself or herself from the others. Walt Whitman hints at this idea of conflicting characters within one's identity: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (Whitman, Part 51). We each contain multitudes of characters and play a multitude of roles. William James wrote, "properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind" (James, Burkhardt and Skrupskelis 294). These different characters are formed in order to help us express ourselves in varying social situations. Erving Goffman, a Canadian sociologist (1922-1982), uses the metaphor of theater to analyze social performance in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*:

Whatever it is that generates the human want for social contact and for companionship, the effect seems to take two forms: a need for an audience before which to try out our vaunted selves, and a need for teammates with whom to enter into collusive intimacies and backstage relaxation. (Goffman "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life." 206)

Human beings can identify themselves in countless different ways, in terms of their professions, their social status, their reputations, their psychological disorder, etc. In doing so, we choose roles to play and masks to wear, in order to continue living the story of who we are or hope to become. While this construction of self gives us a stable point of view through which we can interpret the world, it is problematic in that many people get stuck in negative patterns in relationship to their identity. Unknowingly, they become caught in the self-defeating stories that can come to define their lives: the "not good enough" voice that prevents them from ever trying to accomplish anything or the "what's the point" mantra that keeps a person from ever risking putting herself in situations where she might fail. These patterns are initiated in childhood,

solidified in adolescence, and unconsciously followed in adulthood. Change best happens if we become aware of these characters and how they affect our lives.

Since we may speak of our identity as being composed of different characters, it is natural enough that they should be put onstage. The stage is a mirror for the human story, allowing us to see the different faces that we create and the various ways in which we define them. However, theater pushes the boundary even further, by inviting us to strip away the personae behind which we hide and to show our vulnerability. As acting coach Larry Moss, says, "Acting represents all that human beings experience, and if you want it to be 'nice,' you will never be a serious communicator of the human experience" (Moss 1). The point of the stage is not for an actor to be nice, but to be willing to tell the story, to inhabit the character truthfully, and to illustrate the drama of what it is to be human. Realistic theater supposedly shows the heightened moments that most people hide away in the privacy of their own homes, because they are too afraid to compromise their perfectly constructed identities. These moments, though, are the ones that truly define us as human beings. Renee Emunah, a drama therapist, describes the power of the stage:

In life, we are subject to patterns of behavior, to habitual responses; we fall prey to restricted self-perceptions and the influence of others' limited expectations of us. In the world of make-believe, these constrictions do not apply. We have the freedom and the permission to do what seems to be so difficult to achieve in life—to alter behavioral and role patterns. Under the guise of play and pretend, we can—for once—act in new ways. The bit of distance from real life afforded by drama enables us to gain perspective on our real-life roles and patterns and

actions, and to experiment actively with alternatives. Drama liberates us from confinement, be it socially or psychologically induced. (Emunah xiii)

The stage can be a place of self-awareness, personal growth, and ultimately, transformation. For the performer, the stage is a safe space, an imagined reality wherein she can temporarily try on different roles and behaviors. Theater is unique in that through its shared space the audience can also benefit from the performer's liberation. After all, the audience is invited to empathize with the performers, living vicariously through them for the length of the performance and then reflecting on what it was like to be in someone else's shoes. As Horace (65-8BCE), a poet in Ancient Rome, instructs, "A poem [considered plays today] should thrill a hearer's soul, and move it at its will. Smiles are contagious; so are tears; to see/ Another sobbing, brings sobs from me" (Horace, Watson and Bentley 175).

This idea of theater as a therapeutic process will form the basis of my thesis. I will break down the cast of characters that form my own identity, casting each one as an archetypal circus character. I will make a performance piece in order to explore my life through the metaphor of a circus. By performing my show, I will present audience members with the opportunity to identify aspects of their own personalities in the mirror of my own. In the words of the anthropologist Kristen Hastrup, "A theater audience... witnessing other people's actions always have to invest their imagination in the act of understanding. There is no way to understand from the bare facts alone; understanding is an imaginative event" (Hastrup 225). I propose that such a theater performance will give rise to more consciousness of some of the patterns, both negative and positive, that govern human lives, and that this awareness could potentially engender change within myself and in members of my audience. If we can acknowledge both the uplifting and destructive parts of ourselves and then create characters that mirror these different behaviors, we

can become aware of their patterns and how they influence our actions. We can then use these characters to heal ourselves because we are more clearly able to witness whether their behaviors help us or hinder us. Theater becomes transformative when it catalyzes the performer and the audience alike to reflect on their own human imperfections and recognize the roles they play in their everyday lives. Johann Friedrich von Schiller, a German poet and philosopher, describes this moment of unity:

And then, at last – O Nature! What a triumph for you! – Nature, so frequently trodden to the ground, so frequently risen from its ashes! – when man at last, in all districts and regions and classes, with all his chains of fad and fashion cast away, and every bond of destiny rent asunder – when man becomes his brother's brother with a single all-embracing sympathy, resolved once again into a single species, forgetting himself and the world, and reapproaching his own heavenly origin. Each takes joy in others' delights, which then, magnified in beauty and strength, are reflected back to him from a hundred eyes, and now his bosom has room for a single sentiment, and this is: to be truly human. (Schiller)

Both the performer living the action and the audience witnessing it join together in reflecting on their humanness.

There are many voices from the past that support the concept that theater can be used for healing. As far back as 500 BC, Aristotle wrote in *The Nicomachean Ethics* that “we become just by performing just actions, temperate by performing temperate actions, brave by performing brave actions.” He suggests that theater can be a way of educating people to find certain qualities within themselves that they previously did not realize they possessed. If we act out the behavior

of who we want to become in our daily lives, we will transform into those people. Glynne Wickham, a theater scholar, explains:

Every member of an audience (ourselves included) spends a large part of every day acting out some chosen role (often an imposed role), giving a daily 'performance'. Those people who we encounter in the course of the days are our 'audience'. We wear clothes or 'costume' we consider to be appropriate to that role...(Wickham 7)

Every day we perform our identities for everyone else: we consciously put on clothes that we think people will like and we edit our words to say things that people will want to hear; however, we spend most of our day unaware of our selves and unconscious of which of our characters is directing what we are doing. If we become conscious of a specific behavior, then we can decide to change it by rehearsing a new pattern that helps us either to conform to the expectations of others or to rebel against them.

Self-transformation through acting is one of the methods on which I will base my thesis exploration. My experiment will be to investigate the possibility of changing identity through changing the way in which the character acts. By embodying some of the characters that I wish to become more like, I will explore the validity of this premise. If I act a character who possesses the qualities that I want, will I begin to see positive change in myself? If I embody the qualities that I want to get rid of in a character, will I be more aware when I fall into these negative patterns? Will this awareness empower me to avoid such behavior? The proof remains to be seen.

In his famous speech to the players, Hamlet emphasized that the stage must mirror to its audience what they experience in life:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure (*Hamlet*, 3.2.17-24)

In order to affect its audience, the world of the play must mirror the society in which it is being performed. After all, the internal conflict within Hamlet's fractured identity could just as easily be seen on the streets as on the stage. However, on stage, we are given admission to hear his personal thoughts and experience his struggle between what he thinks is right and what is actually right. As the actor of my own show, I want to reflect the typical patterns of behavior that haunt us as human beings. Ben Kingsley, an international award-winning actor, believes that "Too often actors think it's all about them, when in reality it's all about the audience being able to recognize themselves in you" (Vickers 223). My goal is that the audience will recognize in my show some of my characters in themselves, which, might help them access a greater awareness of how some of these patterns of behavior get in their way –and thereby make change more achievable.

The experimental theater artist Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), trained the actors in his Polish Laboratory Theatre to experiment with his own therapeutic process to form characters from themselves.

Theatre –through the actor's technique, his art in which the living organism strives for higher motives –provides an opportunity for what could be called integration,

the discarding of masks, the revealing of the real substance: a totality of physical and mental reactions. This opportunity must be treated in a disciplined manner, with a full awareness of the responsibilities it involves. Here we can see the theatre's therapeutic function for people in our present day civilization. It is true that the actor accomplishes this act, but he can only do so through an encounter with the spectator –intimately, visibly, not hiding behind a cameraman, wardrobe mistress, stage designer or make-up girl –in direct confrontation with him, and somehow “instead of” him. The actor's act –discarding half measures, revealing, opening up, emerging from himself as opposed to closing up –is an invitation to the spectator. (Grotowski and Barba 255)

In his method, Grotowski tested the idea of the ‘total act’ in which the actor transcends the performance, sacrificing himself to reveal a truth that is ironically both intimate and universal (Wolford). “If the actor, by setting himself a challenge, publicly challenges others, and through excess, profanation and outrageous sacrilege reveals himself by casting off his everyday mask, he makes it possible for the spectator to undertake a similar process of self-penetration” (Grotowski and Barba 34). Grotowski wanted to inspire the audience to expose and examine themselves by casting off their own masks; he wanted them to penetrate their inner selves just like the actors that they were watching onstage.

During the same time period, Augusto Boal (1931-2009) was writing *Theater of the Oppressed*, which suggested that conventional theater spectatorship is oppressive because it does not allow the audience to participate actively. He believed in the idea of transforming spectators into “spect-actors” so that they would be liberated to express themselves by being both an actor and an observer (Boal "Theater of the Oppressed"). In *Rainbow of Desire*, published in 1995:

The process is therapeutic when it allows—and encourages—the patient to choose from several alternatives to the situation in which he finds himself, the situation which caused him unwanted suffering and unhappiness. In enabling, and indeed requiring, the patient to observe himself in action—since his own desire to show obliges him to both see and to see himself—this theatrical process of recounting, in the present, and in front of witnesses ‘in solidarity’, a story lived in the past, offers in itself, an alternative. (Boal *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* 25)

Later in this book, he writes that “theatre is a therapy into which one enters body and soul, soma and psyche” (Boal *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* 28).

As it moved from the artistic stage to the therapeutic environment, inspired by the ideas of artists such as Grotowski and Boal, drama therapy capitalized on the healing power of theater by changing the way in which people identify themselves. If people can transform how they think and feel about themselves, they will be able to free themselves from the negative behaviors that hold them back. From the perspective of drama therapy, I will be the therapist as well as the patient; I will investigate my own process of healing through self-awareness. Using ideas central to drama therapy, I will explore how this type of therapeutic theater can aid me in identifying and developing characters based on behavioral patterns. Reenacting past experiences will enable me to understand my own personal narrative and “to draw on these scenes in future times when real life tests [me]” (Emunah 60). Drama therapy is defined as the combination and collaboration of drama and therapy in an effort to affect positive change in the patient.

The dramatherapist uses drama structures with the specific intention of assisting clients to experience the motions they may have blocked from consciousness, to

gain insight into their motivations and to see how their own processes affect their interactions with others and the others' reactions to them in their lives here and now. (Jennings)

Drama therapy proposes that by redefining the characters that define us, we can build a new identity without the negative patterns that had kept us stuck.

Drama therapy developed only half a century ago in the 1940s, and there is as of yet no standard definition of what its practice entails. Sue Jennings, one of the original creators of drama therapy, attempted to explain what drama therapists do:

Clients are treated through drama, in part, because through their play and past dramatizations they have created a dysfunctional image of themselves in the world. In drama therapy they re-create that image so that it can be reviewed, recognized, and integrated, allowing a more functional self to emerge. The dialectical nature of drama as moving between fictional and actual context provides a way of looking at not only the conceptual basis of drama therapy, but also the practical. (Landy *Drama Therapy: Concepts and Practices* 47)

However, the way in which this is done varies greatly from one therapist to the next. For the purpose of my thesis I will follow Renee Emunah, who spells out the principles on which drama therapy was founded and the several phases of treatment. Her model identifies five origins of drama therapy: dramatic play, theater, role-play, psychodrama, and dramatic ritual. Each origin mirrors one of the five phases of drama therapy as it builds in intensity: interactive dramatic play, scene work, role-play, culmination enactment, and dramatic ritual. Through these five phases, people can begin to build a new identity based on more positive, fulfilling narratives.

Dramatic play is what children do when they instinctually impersonate adult role models. It is a naturally occurring part of childhood to use dolls to act out stories and to put on plays for people because it is “a psychological defense mechanism by which the individual discharges his internal impulses through symbolic or actual enactment” (Blatner 1). Consequently, it has been shown to have many benefits to children as it gives them the opportunity to “exist simultaneously in the imaginary realm and the objective realm” (Emunah 5). This dual consciousness makes dramatic play useful for drama therapy because patients can act out a scene as if it were real, even as they are aware that it is a fictional situation. Therefore, they have an opportunity to fully express themselves like children in an effort to grow and heal without worrying about the potential consequences. In his clinical practice, D.R. Johnson uses spontaneous versions of dramatic play to diagnosis his patients by observing the style, content, behavior and maintenance of boundaries of the improvisation. This program is called *transformations*, an improvised scenario in which “roles and scenes are constantly transformed and reshaped according to the clients’ ongoing stream of consciousness and internal imagery” (Johnson 11). Like children, these patients express themselves through stories without feeling trapped by specific scenarios and rules. Dramatic play lays the foundation for drama therapy by creating a warm, open, non-threatening environment in which everyone feels comfortable enough to interact socially with one another. The exercises employed in dramatic play include: improvisation, structured games, participatory exercises, and pretend play. During this phase, it is really important to allow for the movement of the body in space to be free and open to impulses. Also, this is the time to establish trust within oneself as well as the group, so that one can begin to foster relationships. Ultimately, the goal is to feel a sense of permission to do anything that one’s heart desires and thus be liberated from the inhibited, trapped self.

Because actors play fictional characters, theater is a useful convention in the world of drama therapy because it allows patients to express themselves without actually admitting that they're being themselves. "Given the dangers of expression, a disguise may function not so much as a way of concealing something as a way of revealing as much of it as can be tolerated in an encounter," writes Goffman (Goffman "Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction" 77). It is the distance that exists between patients and the people they play that allows them to feel comfortable enough to expose themselves and confront hidden truths. Theater differs from dramatic play in that theater has a more clearly defined structure, with specific roles and scenes that people take on and play in front of an audience. It is this very structure that invites patients to let go of their self-consciousness and own the character for themselves.

Many theorists and teachers of acting have developed various approaches to exploring character and self. For example, Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), the Russian actor, teacher, and theater director, created a method that was based on the actor identifying a commonality between himself and his character. He encouraged actors to find moments in their own lives that connected them to their characters; through this process, the actor could discover the "inner truth" of the character. By contrast, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), a German playwright and director who wanted to instigate social and political change through theater, believed that an emotional distance between the character and actor allowed the audience to look more critically at the events of the play. The "alienation effect," an idea principal to his work, created a world in which actors distanced themselves from their characters by acting in an objectified manner. He did not want the audience to relate to his performances; instead he focused on "stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about" the people onstage (Brooker 191). These two acting methods serve contradictory

purposes for the actors and audience; Stanislavski aims at strengthening the emotional identification of the actor with his character, whereas Brecht wants the actor to dissociate himself from the character. Jerzy Grotowski had an even greater influence on drama therapy because he inspired self-reflection and revelation both in the audience and the actor. Eventually, Grotowski left theater and produced theater-based transformational exercises without the performance aspect. His progenitor was Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), a French playwright, actor, theorist, and director who was deeply affected by ritualistic theater in the Balinese culture:

The Balinese productions take shape at the very heart of matter, life, reality. There is in them something of the ceremonial quality of a religious rite in the sense that they extirpate from the mind of the onlooker all ideas of pretense, of cheap imitations of reality. This intricately detailed gesticulation has only one goal, an immediate goal which it approaches by efficacious means, the efficacy of which we are even meant to experience immediately. The thoughts it aims at, the spiritual states it seeks to create, the mystic solutions it proposes, are aroused and attained without delay or circumlocution. All of which seems to be an exorcism to make our demons flow. . . . There is something that has this character of a magic operation in this intense liberation of signs, restrained at first, then suddenly thrown into the air. (Artaud 60-61)

His fascination with ceremonies inspired Artaud to use gesture, images, dreams, and poetry to connect the actor to the audience, taking them “on a magical journey in which truths were revealed and emotional and spiritual purging occurred” (Emunah 10) . Artaud’s “The Theatre of Cruelty” proposes “to resort to a mass spectacle; to seek in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of festivals

and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets” (Artaud 85). Artaud hoped to create performances that forced the bourgeois to pay attention to the problems of society: he believed that surreal theater could be a tool for healing the violence and cruelty that existed between the social classes. For this purpose, he wanted to create theater that gave its audience a more visceral and active experience, immersing them in the cruelty and devastation of war and other issues.

Another form of theater that deals with the relationship between character and self is autobiographical theater, in which the roles that one enacts are representations of different aspects of oneself. Rachel Rosenthal, an autobiographical performance artist, first discovered the possibility of the art form when reading Artaud’s *Theater and Its Double*:

It was as if a veil had lifted. I immediately sensed that I actually could use all my talents within one context and not feel torn any more. I put this realization into practice at once, and over the years, evolved a theatre, that encompassed all the things I loved: art, sound, lights, objects, text, movement, masks. (Rosenthal 17)

Rosenthal seeks to “rid herself of her own demons while providing a catalytic medium through which viewers are encouraged to begin their own self-examinations” (Bettendorf 1). One of her works is titled *Fat Vampire*:

We are all suicides. For who kills us but us? After all, whether of ‘natural’ or ‘unnatural’ causes, our death is us... Thus I become prey to the Fat Vampire. The Fat Vampire is fat from the accumulation of countless botched up deaths not allowed to die. (Rosenthal and Chaudhuri 36)

In this piece, Rosenthal introduces her audience to the character of the Fat Vampire, a self-destructive demon who has plagued her for her entire life. “1946: Rice Croquettes. I refuse the

death of my childhood and the subsequent glimpse of paradise...1978: Häagen Dazs Ice Cream. I refuse the death of the Fat Vampire, of my marriage, of 51 years of my life” (Rosenthal and Chaudhuri 38-39). *The Circus of Myself* is an exercise in autobiographical theater, in which I will explore aspects of myself through the metaphor of a circus.

When an actor hides behind the mask of a character, she can feel free enough to bare her soul and acknowledge the vulnerabilities of what it is to be human. Our humanness is what we all share. Our common experience allows us to communicate simultaneously on a deeply personal and universal level. Theater, the second phase of drama therapy, assists people in feeling more comfortable with one another. The focus is primarily on scene work, in which one is assigned a role unlike any from one’s own life. This step is intended to help people to discover new characters inside themselves that they hadn’t known were there. The theater phase of drama therapy is the time for liberating oneself from the constraints that foster repression; it is the time for secret self-revelation, in which it is still possible to act out behind the guise of a character. The drama therapist Renee Emunah remarks, “The dramatic medium provides the safeguard, or disguise, which enables self revelation. Participants in this context often seem to both expose more of themselves and feel safer than in normal everyday encounters” (Emunah 38).

Once people have learned how to create new characters through improvisation and scene work, it is time for them to start tackling themselves as characters through role-play. As Jacob L. Moreno (1889-1974), one of the fathers of psychodrama, stated, “I become a person to the extent that I can play out many roles of myself and also play out roles of others through the process of role-reversal” (Landy "The Concept of Role in Drama Therapy" 224). The idea of naming the role that one is going to play provides a separation between the self and the many characters that

it plays. This distance allows for the person to witness, evaluate, and revise the characters in favor of more helpful alternatives. This stage of drama therapy investigates the multidimensionality of the human being and how the differing aspects of our identity influence our lives negatively or positively. As Mangham (1936-2004), author of *Interactions and Interventions in Organizations*, says, “In recognition and awareness lies the possibility of change: the possibility of creating new scripts, new directions, and new performances” in one’s social life (Mangham 28). Role-play consists of dramatic enactment, which in this application means rehearsing real situations that the participants have experienced or could potentially experience in the future. Unlike real life, however, scenes have a built-in end point at which the participants can stop and reflect on what they just felt, witnessed, and experienced. In this way, role-play provides a structure within which to discover oneself in a simulated reality without actually facing the challenges that could potentially come with it. For one example, a group of recovering alcoholics might practice coping with being offered wine at a party or being at a bar. In this way, those who participate in role-play can explore the many different parts of themselves so that in the end, “one should be able to answer the question: Who am I? And the answer involves both an identification of individual roles I play and an integration among my many roles” (Landy "The Concept of Role in Drama Therapy" 223). Human beings play many different parts on a daily basis and it is only when we step away and look back at them that we can figure out which are healthy and which need to be let go. Phase three of drama therapy focuses on changing behavior that is self destructive, by focusing on the possibility of new dynamics and behaviors. Furthermore, the patient role-plays other people in his life so that he can try to understand the other person’s perspective. This phase enables people to explore and empathize with themselves and others.

Psychodrama is a branch of psychotherapy wherein a person acts out her personal issues instead of simply just saying them. Guided by the director (therapist), the protagonist (the subject of the performance) lives through her life dramas by exploring various dilemmas and possible solutions. Psychodrama's "aim is to make total behavior directly visible, observable, and measurable. The protagonist is being prepared for an encounter with himself" (Moreno xxii). Psychodramatic scenes, which usually address troubling emotional moments, scarring memories, or childhood traumas, benefit the participant by allowing him to relive the situation. At times, this reenactment of a traumatic experience within a psychodrama session can be cathartic for the individual and other members of the therapy group. The difference between psychodrama and drama therapy is that drama therapy is more group-oriented, employs more fictional improvisations and scenes, and uses a wider range of types of theater including puppets, story telling, and mask work. Emunah distinguishes the two in this way: "the role of the classical psychodramatist is that of director in every sense, whereas the drama therapist is generally more of a fellow player" (Emunah 19). Therefore, the field of drama therapy has a wider range of possible therapeutic methods. However, the two elements that both have in common are role reversal and role-playing. Role reversal occurs when the main protagonist of a therapy session is asked to exchange roles with another person in order to understand the perspective of someone in his or her own life. This reversal can play a powerful role in creating empathy between people because during the span of an exercise one can see life through a totally different perspective and walk in totally different shoes. Role-playing encourages people to embrace both their individuality and the universality of what it is to be a human being. It is this same oneness that we find reflected in the goals of psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875-1961), who wrote:

The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. (Jung and Hull 86)

With the creation of role-play and role reversal, Moreno gave the world methods in which people can relate to one another and recognize that we're not all that different. The fourth phase of drama therapy re-enacts core issues of a participant's life to give her the opportunity to change the way she has responded in the past and to redefine the narrative of her life.

Dramatic ritual employs old traditions of ceremonial, ritualized theater in service of drama therapy. In the past, dramatic rituals were the way in which a community came together to share events, such as celebrating the happiness of a wedding, the empowerment of coming of age ceremonies, etc. Ritualized theater has been traced back to the prehistoric times in which shamans functioned as healers and facilitated the release of powerful emotions in participants and observers. In cultures that still practice shamanism, illness is sometimes viewed as a loss of the soul. "Bates, referring to shamans as 'primitive actors,' describes the trance state in which the shaman/actor perceives and embodies the 'illness,' adding that the shaman 'heals in a manner very like highly intensive drama therapy'" (Bates 22; Emunah 21). The power of healing rituals comes from their power to "express and embody the emotional, the mental and the spiritual, the personal and the universal, the secular and the sacred" (Emunah 21). These rituals mix healing with a religious experience, using art forms including drama, dance, visual art, music, and poetry to take the observers on the journey, in which the shaman takes his patient through darkness into light. The patient lets go of pain and grief along the way. In the final phase of drama therapy,

dramatic ritual collectively concludes the group's interactions together and honors the group for their healing work and support of one another.

As Oscar Wilde says, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person; give him a mask and he will tell the truth" (Wilde 162). Drama therapy provides the mask that distances people far enough away so that they can see themselves in the light of their own habitual patterns, and their unrealized potential. By finally witnessing their own behavioral patterns, people can achieve real change from the inside out to become better versions of themselves. This suggests that it is lack of awareness more than unwillingness to change that is the problem. Several groups, not licensed in drama therapy, have tried to address this problem, using methods to wake people up from the repetitive patterns of their day-to-day life. One such group, The Mirrors, will be the focus of my next chapter. Today, with the emergence of the concept of drama therapy, we are beginning to realize what the Ancient Greeks realized a long time before us: theater is a healing art form which can bring greater awareness to those willing to step onto its stage.

2

The Mirrors

Oscar Wilde regarded the theater as “the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being” (Comey 1). Wilde captures why theater can be used for transformational work such as drama therapy; it allows us to explore the mysteries of our humanity. The theater allows us to create characters who remind us of real people, to put them in scenarios that reflect the dramas of real life, and then to see how they act and react to what happens within the chosen plot. It invites us, in effect, to watch ourselves—to observe and reflect on our own actions and beliefs. As the drama therapist Renee Emunah explains, “In the process of expressing un-lived and unacknowledged parts of ourselves, we discover our shared humanity. Whether we are playing fictitious characters or playing ourselves, whether we are acting or witnessing the act of others, drama invokes our capacity to empathize and identify with others” (Emunah xv).

When Hamlet decides to stage for his uncle a scene in which he shows him precisely how he murdered Hamlet’s father, he is, as we have seen, holding a mirror up to nature (Shakespeare). In the spirit of showing virtue her own feature and scorn her own nature, Gabrielle Roth, founder of the *5 Rhythms™* dance and theater practice, created an experimental theater company in the 1980s called the Mirrors. This company was devoted to using theater as a way to reflect on the self; its mission was to “dig through the ruins of our contemporary psyches, to probe for the truth, to find a level of authenticity that seemed to be missing” from the world (Roth and Loudon 24). Roth wanted to inspire people to rediscover their own uniqueness by grounding their physical bodies in dance, opening emotional pathways through the

exploration of the heart, and turning personal stories into art.

Like the acting teacher Stella Adler, she believed that “theater is a spiritual and social X-ray of its time” (Comey 3). Like an X-ray, it looks beneath the surface in order to see the world for what it really is. Theater is willing to show people at their worst moments; it invites an audience to witness characters at their most vulnerable, including events in which they struggle with inner conflict. Conflict defines drama. Roth understood this, and Mirrors became a theater group dedicated to showcasing a cast of varying characters taken from the conflicts of each person’s life experience. Since society was obsessed with appearances and reputation, Roth wanted to create a safe place, free from the masks which hide our inner tensions, a space dedicated to the theatricality of human conflict. Eventually, the group’s performance work developed into “the story of a doctor, a lawyer, a nobody, a hairdresser, a go-go dancer, a fairytale princess, a free-lance metaphysical-existentialist, and a shaman, all trapped in a one-act play in which the performers and audience could witness themselves with humor and compassion” (Roth and Loudon 24). Instead of trying to deny the drama of everyday life, the Mirrors put it onstage, reflecting the personal and cultural issues of that time for both themselves and the audience. This willingness on the part of the ensemble to be vulnerable and honest led them to turn their lives into stories and characters that they performed for hundreds of people; “this was the healing” (Roth and Loudon 25). For four years, this ensemble formed a theatrical laboratory to explore and grow as individuals; for Roth, it was “a place to research [her] obsession with what it really means to be a human being, a whole one” (Roth and Loudon 25).

Roth created her own vocabulary to explain her work, stating that the goal was “to awaken the soul to experience the power of seeing” the difference between the real and the unreal part of ourselves” – that is, the soul and the ego (Roth and Loudon 143). The soul, unique

to each and every person, makes up the very essence of our being and “unites our body, heart, and mind” (Roth and Loudon 144). As she understands it, the ego enjoys making us “live in schizophrenia—thinking one thing, feeling another, acting out a third,” and this leads us to feel torn and confused. The patterns of discord between our bodies, minds, and hearts begin at a young age – for instance, when we learn that we cannot always show how we really feel or say what we really think. We learn to censor ourselves and to justify why we shouldn’t say or feel something. While this impulse is well-intentioned in its desire not to offend, it motivates people to stifle themselves repeatedly in an effort to be accepted by others. In Roth’s vocabulary, this change is considered the emergence of the ego; from the perspectives developed in the previous chapter, it might be considered the beginning of a self-narrative in which a person who does not want to hurt others’ feelings will not say what he is really feeling. This relationship of thought and feeling and action becomes woven into the stories that we tell ourselves at a young age, and as we grow they expand to make us ever more disjointed. “Everyone has an ego. Everyone has a soul. The struggle between these two forces for control over our lives constitutes our personal story, the story no one else can know” (Roth and Loudon 152). To understand the emergence of the ego, Roth looks for experiences that trigger the beginning of a certain pattern or story.

I remember being five years old and playing in my sandbox, building the most beautiful castle. “Mom, Dad, come see my beautiful castle.” But they never came. That’s when the campaign to win their attention began. “Mom, Dad, come see me be president of my class; come see me be high school valedictorian; come see me graduate summa cum laude from Harvard; Mom, Dad, come see me be a successful doctor; come see my beautiful house; come see my beautiful blond girl friend. (Roth and Loudon 165)

Her opinion is that the stories that we use to define who we are hold us back from being who we *truly* are—one's ego patterns become impediments to the virtues of the free expression of the soul. When we build awareness around the stories or identities of our ego characters, we take away their power and choose whether or not to listen to them. By unburdening our minds and being more connected to our physical and emotional selves, we have greater permission to live a more enlightened life. Jungian therapy is based on a similar concept: "To confront a person with his shadow is to show him his own light" (Kehl 56).

In its experimental theater laboratory, the Mirrors worked on exposing ego characters by "pay[ing] close attention to its personas—their standard lines, habits, costumes, body language—and then blow[ing] them up into distinct characters" (Roth and Loudon 153). In order to uncover these characters, the ensemble tracked behavioral patterns, a method that I too will use to identify my own cast of characters. First, an actor must research each of the "characters" who comprise the ego by observing oneself with as much objectivity as possible. Much as in life, the less attachment or bias to the character one has, the clearer and more helpful the observation will be. Next, she has to listen for her inner monologues—the voices in her head that rationalize her accustomed actions, the explanations. Simultaneously, she also must pay attention to her outer voice, which forms the script of the character; this is the text that she constantly says in her daily life when these characters appear. After close observation of these voices and the actions that accompany them, the actor will begin to notice a pattern that goes along with a specific character – the "repetitive plot lines" in which this character lives. Roth had met Fritz Perls (1893-1970) at Esalen Institute in the late 1960s where he was developing his work, Gestalt Therapy: an experimental form of psychotherapy that focuses on enhancing the awareness of the self in the present moment. Using this conceptual framework, Roth would encourage her students to

consolidate all of the various behaviors manifested by a character into one gestalt, such as “victim” or “liar,” that describes all of the various behaviors encompassed within the character. Finally, the character was given a name associated with this gestalt: Vic Tim, Captain Control, and Norma Nobody are just a few of at least two dozen that the members of the Mirrors created and explored.

Roth’s advice is that once one finds a character that fits, “Watch how it moves. Hear what it sings, listen to its lines. What are its entrance cues, what brings this character onstage? Does it appear when you are alone, with a friend, or in a crowd?” (Roth and Loudon 156). These questions get one in touch with the heart of the character – his or her motivation, what triggers him or her to appear, the physical place he or she lives in the body. A physical observation for the character Norma Nobody includes “shoulders slumped; head and hands hunched forward; face dull; chest sunken; she moves with heavy, indolent effort”; the song of Valerie Victim sounds like “ My hair is too thin, my nose too long, God fucked me up, He made me wrong. I’ve had trouble since I grew up; It’s not my fault, my parents screwed up” (Roth and Loudon 157). Once these questions are answered and the character becomes clearer, the actor must make the character larger than life, exaggerating how he behaves and speaks, pushing the character as far as he can, and making fun of how he acts. Self-revelatory poetry, prose, and monologues can be written to describe how this character works within the actor’s life. One powerful example of this work is a monologue by Captain Control:

I learned that the only way to be with people was not be with them. To be in control. To be special, be the best. Achievement, that will get me what I need. So I compete and compare with conceit and flair. I compete and compare with deceit and despair. I’m not with you unless I compete—that’s my deceit. I don’t

see you unless I compare—that's my despair. What I end up with is what I started with, nonstop achievements that never satisfy. (Roth and Loudon 162-63)

Through this work on identifying the ego characters, each member of the group was trying to be a “holy actor” – a term Roth adopted from Grotowski’s *Towards a Poor Theater* – by “acting from the soul rather than the ego” (Roth and Loudon 147). Only through the awareness of a self-character can we change and stop acting out the destructive patterns typical of it. Eventually, the group members began to map the shifts from character to character: “From Defensive Dan I usually spin into Weak Willie... When Weak Willie goes all the way he becomes my victim character, Bob Abused...” until he once again returns to Defensive Dan (Roth and Loudon 166). Such cycles evidence how these characters sustain themselves, shifting from one to the next so as to keep a person entangled in the cycle. Sometimes, Roth notes, “characters also move from one extreme to the other—from puritan to hedonist, from feeling superior to feeling inferior” (Roth and Loudon 168). This idea of extremes is a theme that I explored in my own play: confidence vs. insecurity, strength vs. weakness, excitement vs. fear. At times, these opposing energies were expressed through the same character; at other times, they were demonstrated through two characters in direct relationship with each other. For the Mirrors, the ultimate goal was to “become actors in the theater of daily living, consciously aware of what we’re doing...the holy actor sees, and then uses characters in the theater of life” (Roth and Loudon 170). Through the process of awareness, according to Roth, we are able to take a step back from ourselves and acknowledge the range of characters that reside within us. Once we can do that, we can allow ourselves to travel through the characters, playing roles and then letting them go. We play the different parts of our identities, but do not let anyone define us.

Interviews

I interviewed five of the eight original company members of the Mirrors to find out how this type of work has influenced their lives and whether or not they still think about the characters they created. What follows are some of the responses.

What inspired you to join the Mirrors theater group?

I was aware that I needed something to help me get my life on track coming from a family with severe alcoholic and addictive issues. Using movement and theater to create awareness and healing in myself seemed like the best and most fun way to achieve this. It was in so many ways, but I do remember that the areas where I carried the most shame were the parts where when I first started performing them it was like pulling teeth. It took real courage to be so honest, and I do believe this process made me a stronger person. (Amber Kaplan, an original member of The Mirrors)

What are some of the exercises that you participated in while you were part of the Mirrors?

Lots of movement work – finding my own home rhythm and exploring others; getting out of my comfort zone and trying new ways to move and relate to others. Unity circles where we would form a group and take turns leading and following each other's movements and sounds. Sound exercises, just saying the vowels, AEIOU, over and over again, or mumbling nonsensically – learning to let go of my voice. The porpoise dance moving around the room without intention to get to a place, which required being totally present in the moment or you could get slammed into. Movement is a great metaphor for life and I learned a lot by watching myself and others relate in dance and movement because it gave me insight into how I related to others in regular real life. (Jay Kaplan, an original member of the Mirrors)

What do you think it is about theater that allows for healing?

By taking my tough times and writing about them and thinking about how my life had shaped me, the act of being creative and turning my sore spots into art – well, that alone began re-shaping my identity. Then, next, to refine and perform these pieces took it to another level because now it was no longer about me alone isolated with my problems. It was the countless people who approached me after performances to admit, “I do that too,” which led to some awesome conversations and healing due to sharing. Very powerful! (Amber Kaplan)

What was more healing for you, writing the material or performing it?

I guess it's a little hard for me to separate the writing of the material from the performing of it. I think we generated the majority of our work from improv and the "therapeutic process". As I remember it, there was rarely a time I sat down and actually wrote something. Which oddly was terrific training for a screenwriter. I learned how to keep the ideas coming, keep them fluid and moving. If I hadn't learned that, I'd have spent 100 percent of my career sitting and waiting and panicking and banging my head against a computer, hoping for an idea. With my mirrors background, I only spend 90 percent of my time doing that. (Melissa Rosenberg, an original member of the Mirrors)

How did it feel to perform such personal, self-revealing material in front of an audience?

I remember it as being a very exciting time of life, and felt that we were all privileged to be working in a cutting-edge theater group with a wild artist director, Gabrielle Roth, who was constantly pushing us to be more real, more authentic, more intense, yet without losing the light touch of humor and a sort of existential distance from the "character" we were portraying, which was ourselves and our own life stories, but somewhat dramatized and caricatured and exaggerated to emphasize the poignant foibles of our daily realities and provide a bit of

perspective, whether it had to do with our relationships, sex lives, diets, addictions, dreams, failures, personality traits and flaws, and so on. And the intention was to offer up our personal lives and stories in such a way so that it served as a gift to the audience, providing them with a "mirror" of their own lives, as they laughed in recognition, seeing themselves paraded before them on stage. So it was edgy, it was lots of fun, it was gratifying, and it was very challenging. (Eliezer (then Elliot) Sobel, an original member of the Mirrors)

Do you still think about or use the work that you did for yourself today?

The profound effect of adopting the basic philosophy of the foundational Mirrors Five Rhythms Spiral Map as a life perspective has informed and deepened every aspect of my being...COMPASSION. (Martha Peabody, an original member of the Mirrors)

Tribal Mirrors Workshop in New York City

I found out that Gabrielle was teaching a workshop in New York City, so I signed up for it as research for my thesis. I had no idea what I was walking into when I opened the door of the Stephen Weiss Studio on 711 Greenwich Street. I heard familiar music, calling people to the dance floor, saw the mess of moving bodies already allowing the rhythms of the music to take over, and all I could think was, "What am I doing here?" You see, I'm the kind of person who loves to take risks and to go on adventures in theory, but sometimes in practice I end up feeling a bit overwhelmed and so I hide on the periphery of the floor, retreating to my personal space and letting my hair down. I'm not ready to be open to everyone else, I need to protect myself. I need to give myself the opportunity to settle into the space, into the energy of the room, into my own feet. Once I find and embrace the rhythm of the music, my body can follow it and I am free to let go of my resistance and doubts. I can just be there, present in the moment for at least a few

seconds before my fears come back. I have just enough time to take in the “breath of fresh air” that is Gabrielle Roth. She sits at the front of the room, collected, calm, and oh so cool. More than anything else, she has a clarity in her eyes that tells me that she can already see right through me and all my characters, so what’s the use in hiding them? Still, part of me is unsure about how to express the jumble of thoughts and emotions that are currently wracking the inside of my mind and body like a storm. “I hope she likes me. How do I impress her? You’re not here to impress anybody. Chelsea, stop thinking, just focus on your breath. Argh, breathe, no thought! Stop thinking.” I can drive myself crazy trying not to be stuck in my head. Believe it or not, it’s hard not to think, especially with the amount of pressure I put on myself. I want to be perfect, even in a workshop about how humans are innately imperfect and in which I am supposed to be observing the character that pushes me to think that way. After the first day, I wrote, “Body is tired, Mind is wild, Heart of a child, Soul being trialed.”

What helped me get past my thoughts were the theatrical elements of the workshop, wherein we acted out different energies and the personas we use to mask them. For example, one of my patterns is self-deprecating energy masked by the persona of laziness. To me, this example made complete sense because when I’m not feeling good about myself, I tend to be more lax about taking care of myself. Even though I know it would make me feel better about myself if I went to the gym, I won’t go because what’s the point, I’m not worth it. This energy that I explored during the workshop grew into the same one embodied by the Fat Lady during my performance—the heavy, resigned stubbornness of someone who has given up.

People brought in some of their own characters to perform for the group. Some were entertaining, others were frightening, but within this exposure to a variety of characters I realized that I was not alone. As I watched other people battle with their own inner voices, I saw parts of

my own patterns before me onstage—mirroring for me the reality of my own characters. It was much like what I would imagine a drama therapy session to be like, in that it awakened me to see how ridiculous these patterns really are. Afterwards, I wrote in my journal, “I am what I am/ Don’t you see/ The masks I wear/ Aren’t really me.” This workshop was a gift in that it gave me the opportunity to look into the same mirror that I hoped to create for the audience in the performance of my piece. It drew me into the process by which I could explore and act out my various characters. It gave me the freedom to recognize myself in others and accept that these characters are just part of a common thread of what makes us human.

Our characters “star in our own personal melodrama” and make us feel special and different from everyone else (Roth and Loudon 152). “Poor me,” “If only I were...,” “Life is not fair” are just a few of the taglines that excuse us from ever having to fulfill our potential. The truth is our characters are not special at all. Gabrielle alluded to this idea during the workshop when she allowed us to observe each other’s characters. Gabrielle’s goal is to inspire people to become artists and playwrights of their own lives – freeing themselves to live life more fully. By exposing my own characters and stories, I am attempting to create a mirror through which other people can see themselves and their own characters. Through my project, I hope to prove that theater’s ability to reflect how we live has the power to create a healing space for me as well as my audience.

3

Preface to the Script

I still remember the exact moment when the idea for this show was first imagined. It was this past summer, and I was sitting on the couch at my cousin's house after having just put her baby down for a nap. My mom had come by to drop something off and we were talking; I might have been complaining. I said to her, "Sometimes, my life feels like a crazy circus." And my mom responded, "That would make a great theater piece." That answer was not quite what I was expecting, but I remember saying, "That's not funny. But that isn't such a bad idea." After all, the circus is full of great characters that could easily be matched with the different patterns of behavior in my life. One of the first examples that came to mind was my need to be overly busy, juggling too many balls in the air at one time—clearly, a Juggler. Suddenly, my mother and I were laughing and coming up with all the different characters that could be part of my very own inner circus—the Clown, the Trapeze Artist, the Lion Tamer and Lion, the Strongman, etc. After brainstorming all the potential characters, the next step was to try to figure out what behavioral patterns these characters might best reflect. For instance, the Tightrope Walker might be the personification of my perfectionism because I characteristically want to appear poised, never taking a single misstep off the rope – which from the heights of my soaring expectations could be fatal. As I began to write, these characters gave me voices through which I could express various parts of myself. By hearing what they sounded like, I became more aware of patterns repeatedly blocking me. As I got closer to performance, the characters' voices got louder and more threatening while I continued to write the piece – I think because those parts of me didn't want to be revealed. It truly was like having a circus in my own head, maddening at times, but also revelatory.

While creating this piece, I was deeply inspired by the work of Gabrielle Roth and the Mirrors in regard to identifying the characters within myself. Taking her advice, I watched myself as objectively as I could in different contexts: when I was talking to my friends, my parents, or my professors; when I was feeling under pressure, upset, or relaxed.

I noticed my tendencies and began to take notes on dialogues I found myself engaging in repeatedly with others and with myself. I might, for example, reflexively say to others, “Oh sure, I can do that, don’t worry about it” – while thinking to myself, “I’m sick and tired of letting people take advantage of me.” By keeping my eyes open to what I was doing and my ears open to what I was saying, I began to identify in aspects of myself a variety of everyday personas, each of which had a typical way of behaving and speaking. As, contradictory patterns emerged, I started to explore what circus characters might embody them. For example, the Ringmaster represented my need to be in control and to keep the show of my life going forward so that no one might suspect when I am having a problem. The Ringmaster keeps all my other characters in order, so that the face I show to the world is always the most flattering and pulled-together. As I explored this character on my feet, I began to play with how he should speak to the audience versus how he should speak to the other circus performers. I knew that I wanted him to be a presentational character, and that his movement should be choreographed and his gesture stylized. In an effort to put this energy into his text, I wrote him a song with which to begin the show:

Welcome to the circus

Please take your seats

I am the ringmaster of this show

Welcome to the circus

The characters you meet

Might remind you of someone you know

While working on his monologues, I discovered that his need for control best expressed itself in rhyme: it provided the structure of sounds and rhythms that suggested his strict discipline.

The process of writing the other characters depended greatly on who they were and how aware I was of the details that went along with their patterns of behavior. For some, I could sit down at my computer, do research on what it would be like to live like them, and just write, occasionally closing my eyes to conjure images, or getting on my feet to act out a physical moment. Other characters, especially the animals, I needed to explore physically in order to get into their mindset and to find their voice. The Lion is a prime example of this more physical process because it was important for me to understand both the power and the caged feeling of this animal. When I sat down to write the Lion Tamer, she came out in rhyme— another controlled character whose speech needed a constant rhythm. However, unlike the Ringmaster, the Lion Tamer's rhyme came from opposing energies that made her an edgy character: she struggled with her fear in order to dominate the Lion. Although I wrote the Lion and Lion Tamer separately, the piece became much stronger when I joined the two of them together; the dialogue between them invited the other's presence to be felt even when they weren't onstage, allowing the conflict to escalate as they antagonized each other. One of the most profound revelations of the show was the superiority/inferiority reversal in which the Lion Tamer ends in the cage while the Lion roams free. As I rehearsed, I found that the Lion's fear kept me moving forward: I wanted to break free with this creative process; whereas the fear stemming from the Lion Tamer made me feel insecure: I wanted to give up on this project. It is interesting that this pattern is reflected in my everyday life as well.

Some aspects of my characters were inspired by my research of various approaches to drama therapy. One of the personas that I explored during the Tribal Mirrors workshop in New York City grew into the Fat Lady – the heavy, resigned stubbornness of someone who has given up. Gabrielle Roth’s concept of trizophrenia was a partial inspiration for the Tightrope Walker: “But most of the time, my heart feels one way, my head another, and a tug of war begins pulling me in opposite directions until I feel tired and sore.” Roth had encouraged her followers to listen to the dialogues in their heads. During rehearsal for the Tightrope Walker, I heard: “I can’t keep doing this. I simply can’t. I wish I could but I can’t. No you don’t seem to understand, I can’t. It’s not that I’m not trying, I just can’t.”

Throughout the piece, I wanted to create characters who had their own stories to tell against the backdrop of the circus. For example, the Trapeze Artist represents the past and future. The circus theme helped me to embody her inner conflict through the metaphor of the trapeze – even her movement is metaphorical: as she swings between two platforms, she flies forward in faith or backward in fear. As I am about to graduate and enter the uncertainty of the real world, the Trapeze Artist “gaz[ing] into the empty space that lies before me” feels all too familiar. She was the first circus performer I crafted for my proposal, but placing her act toward the end of the show made me realize how much I’ve grown throughout this process. I have created a whole world with my words, a showcase of my crazy cast of characters. So welcome to *The Circus of Myself!*

4

The Circus of Myself

Ringmaster:

(Singing)

Welcome to the circus

Please take your seats

I am the ringmaster of this show

Welcome to the circus

The characters you meet

Might remind you of someone you know

(Speaking)

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls

Welcome to the greatest show on earth

Well at least it should be...for me anyway

It will shock, stun, and astound you

It will— No it won't, who am I kidding

What am I even doing up here?

It will amaze, mystify, and exci-

Haha what garbage...it's just a sick show

You know what, maybe you should all just leave

Get out while you still can

I wish I could, but I'm stuck here performing this act

Over and over and over again

Einstein once said, "The definition of insanity is

doing the same things over and over again

and expecting different results"

I guess that says a lot about me

(Singing)

Welcome to the circus

You'll be entertained
 I have many secrets up my sleeve
 Welcome to the circus
 The cast is so well trained
 Some of what you see you won't believe
 Don't worry about a thing
 You really oughtn't worry at all
 Because a circus is what circus does
 We really want to show you a ball

(Speaks)

Why am I singing? I can't sing.
 For our opening act, I'd like you, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, to focus your attention up high, center stage.

(He transitions into Tightrope walker.)

Can you see the stretch of rope
 Pulled from left to right
 There is no net beneath her
 Only this great height
 She is our tightrope walker
 Balance is her skill
 With grace and poise and beauty
 Watch and she will thrill

Tightrope Walker:

I live my life, balancing above the world on a tightrope. I have for as long as I can remember. Ever since I could walk, I've been walking way up high. In fact, there is a picture of me as just a baby standing on the rope with my parents on either side of me and I'm smiling so wide that it's taking up half my face. The first time I ever did it by myself I was on a rope maybe two feet off the ground and I was only three. Afterwards I gave the rope a huge hug and told him I loved him. I called him Tyro. I was so proud of myself that I couldn't stop talking about it for days. I would make everybody in the circus gather around me so that I could perform for them. Hey

everybody, look at me! I can do it! Look how high I am! At the end, I would give my bow and look up to find a sea of smiles and then, applause. “Yeah, Lu Lu!” “You’re the best!” “Good job sweetheart!” Back then, the rope was about the width of a tennis ball, and my little feet could fit fully on it. It took ten of my small steps to cross it and I would go back and forth, back and forth, creating new challenges for myself each time. Pick up one foot, turn around, take a deep breath, balance. Balance! (*Falls off the beam*). The few times I fell, my parents were always there: comforting me, holding me, making me feel safe. Once I had calmed down, my dad would say, “You ready, Lu?” And I would nod. I had to get back on the rope to show them I wasn’t afraid, but they would let me hold their hands for my first few steps. I relished the security of being balanced between them. As I got older, the rope got narrower and narrower and higher and higher. The tricks I learned got more intricate until I was doing cartwheels and flips while poised in absolute and precarious balance, the rope dancing gently under my feet, guiding me across it.

(She misses her footing slightly and readjusts to stay balanced.)

Suddenly my foot slips. I’m not supposed to slip. I never slip. My body twists so that I can keep my balance, keep both feet on the rope, keep the audience from ever seeing the mistake, keep my perfect smile glued to my face. But on the inside, I’m in a panic and I lose it. Whatever it is. Suddenly my feet are sticky with chalk, glued to the rope as I try to lift them. I can no longer smoothly travel across, but have to drag one foot at a time, my unsteadiness building at every step as this thread of doubt unbraids the rope beneath my feet. I’m stuck in the middle of the tighrope, too scared to take a step forward and yet too driven to go back. I don’t know what’s wrong with me! I want to fall to the ground and have someone else catch me. I don’t want the responsibility of holding myself up. But what if I fall and there isn’t anyone there? Mom? Dad? Is anybody down there? I don’t have a safety net in place to protect me. The Earth is not a forgiving place if you fall too far. Balance, Lou. Breathe. I wish life were easy. That I was certain about things. But most of the time, my heart feels one way and my head another, and a tug of war begins pulling me in opposite directions until I feel tired and sore. How does life get so complicated? I’m all knotted up with this rope of mine. Tied up tight! I get so stressed out...I want to scream. Why am I up here and not down on the ground? I can’t keep doing this. I simply can’t. I wish I could but I can’t. No you don’t seem to understand, I can’t. It’s not that I’m not trying, I just can’t. Oh, what can’t I do, you ask. Anything, I can’t do

anything, I can't move or step forward. I can't cry. I can't smile, not for real. And now you're going to ask me why? And you know what, I can't even tell you. That's the problem, I don't know what's wrong with me or what's holding me back. I just can't. And I'm stuck because when I can't do anything I just end up standing in the same place waiting for something to change. It's all hopeless, 'cause nothing seems capable of moving me... I'm scared. . And to make it even worse, the longer you stay stuck the farther it feels like I have to go. My security is gone and I glance down. Big mistake, because now I'm aware of how far off the ground I am. At least one hundred feet up in the air. I try to remind myself to breathe, to stay calm but it's no use. I'm trapped in the middle of the rope, imprisoned by the open air that surrounds me. All I see is the flatness of the ground below. It taunts me as if to say that my attempt to defy gravity is asking too much, that I should be punished for thinking life could be so simple, so straightforward. Thing is, I still have this damn smile plastered on my face so that you don't see the trouble I'm having. If only you knew. Hah, but then again maybe you're not here to see me succeed but instead secretly imagine the possibility of me falling flat on my face. Are you? *(Move to one side; pretend to falter)* Hah-tricked you! Me-make a mistake? Ha! Are you kidding? I am the epitome of grace, poise, and perfection. You may now clap for me!

(She transitions into Lion Tamer and picks up a whip.)

Lion Tamer:

I am the Lion Tamer

For me, he kneels

I feel my dominance

In the click of my heels

I possess the power of the whip in my hand

The king of the beasts at my command

The cage doors are opening

I know your desire

I aim to please

With my ring of fire. *(Makes a circle with her whip)*

I smirk at danger

As I tame the beast

Time for the show
He's being released

(She transforms from human to animal and ends up in the cage.)

Lion:

I dream of freedom
To run wild amongst the grass and trees
To follow my instincts wherever they may lead
To hunt, to prey
I yearn to escape, but it's all just a fantasy
A dream that I see when I close my eyes
I can feel the sun blazing on my back
The dirt and dried grass cracks beneath my paws
The vast savannah stretching before me in every direction
I see my gazelle in the distance
I'm ready for the chase
My body pushes hard against the ground
I spring, I run
SMACK
Into the metal bars of my own cage
I can't let myself go
I don't have the space
Could I even run
I do tricks for pieces of meat
I perform humiliation
I spend too much of my time locked away
No longer in touch with my pride
I have lost
My roar...

(Lion transforms back into Lion Tamer.)

Lion Tamer:

The King of the Jungle struts over to me
In awe of my courage and humanity
I crack the whip and he roars in my face
My posture full of pride and his disgrace
Act braver, I say, with the crack of my whip
I flick it too hard and bloody his lip
He tastes his own blood and then roars once again
I could attack and you'll never know when...

(On this line, she transforms into the Lion.)

Lion:

I am the Lion, sleek, fierce and cunning
MGM – out of my way
ROAR!!!!
Raging against the bars that restrain me
I fight to find freedom in a world of steel cages
Blocked in every direction
I lie in wait
My instincts come alive
The need to escape building steadily every second
I see my prey, taunting me with the whip
Smell his sweat, his weakness, his humanity
No wimpy yellow brick road for this lion
Forget courage, I want revenge
Oh, Lion Tamer, let's give the people a show
One they will never forget
The door opens
No time to think
I charge
Wild impulses take over my body

To hunt, to kill, to possess what I want
Hunger coursing through my veins
My golden eyes take him in
I bolt toward my prey
Fall into the blindness of attack
The chase
I cannot help myself
Hear me ROOAARR
Ready to devour
And savor the taste of life

(He transitions into Lion Tamer, changing from the predator to the prey.)

Lion Tamer:

Terror takes over, the tables have turned
He'd threatened before, if only I'd learned
The lion is master as I cower and hide
The audience boos. I lose my pride.
Stupid *(Cracks the whip)*
You nobody *(Cracks the whip)*
You stupid worthless nobody *(Cracks the whip)*
Can't see my way out
I try and shout
Fear tames me *(Cracks the whip)*
My heart skips a beat
As I suffer defeat
Fear maims me *(Whips himself)*
Sinking deeper and deeper into the ground
Crawl in, little person, so you can't be found
Failure destroys me
I'm back in the cage
Trembling and silent

Instead of onstage

(As the stage blacks out, we hear the Ringmaster yell, "Go to blackout NOW!!!" Segue into taped clown dialogue.)

Ambo:

Are you ready, Bumbles? Tuck your head in the cannon and get ready to fly.

Bumbles:

Ambo, I'm ready. Fire away...

Ambo:

Ok. I'm lighting the fuse...

5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Blast off!

Bumbles: *(Real voice)* Buuuuummmmmbbblllle-Beeeeeeeee

(We hear a crash and the lights come up center stage on a clown whose hair is all over the place. Clown drunkenly dances and attempts to move the balance beam. He has a lot of difficulty and takes it about the long way. While he's moving it, he keeps getting distracted by the audience. At some points I directly play with the audience, people-pleasing clown that I am. Hopefully someone will kiss me on the cheek or shake my hand because I become overjoyed as I get my praise. Stumbles back to the stage in joy tripping over the Ringmaster's hat.)

Ringmaster:

(He picks up his hat and puts it on.)

What do you think you're doing

You people-pleasing moron

Yes it's you I'm shooin

You're getting in the way

The audience will start booing

So get your ass off the stage

Do you not hear what I'm saying

You worthless piece of fluff

You'll never amount to anything

You'll never be good enough
Go get me the dumbbell
You stupid dumbbell

(He transitions from Ringmaster to Clown during the last two sentences so we can see the clown's reaction to the abuse.)

Clown:

OK, boss.

(She trips and smiles at the audience as she goes to get the dumbbell and brings it in center stage as if it weighs nothing. Then the Ringmaster's spotlight comes up center stage, so she takes his hat and imitates the Ringmaster to introduce the Strongman.)

Ladies and Jellybeans, I mean Gentlemen, Clowns of All Ages, Hahahahhhhh! Sorry, boss!

(We see the clown offer up the hat to the Ringmaster as she transforms into him. He points threateningly to the light booth and mimes slitting his throat. The spotlight goes out.)

Ringmaster:

(Mutters) Bumbles, get off stage! I'll deal with you later!

(The Ringmaster turns around expecting for the spotlight to come up, but it doesn't. He Aaaa-hems the light booth and then spotlight comes on.)

And now the strongest man on earth.

(His tension transforms him into the Strongman, who moves to stand in front of the weight.)

Strongman:

(He flexes his muscles, wraps tape around his wrists, and goes through his ritual of getting ready to lift.)

I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders, but I am the strongman. I know my job. I lift the weight that nobody else can. I've been training my whole life. I've made many sacrifices so that I can be this way. I wake up in the middle of the night to drink a protein shake and swallow raw eggs. I lift weights twice a day, for at least an hour each time. I have been on a diet since I was

16 and I never cheat. I live and breathe discipline. I have made it an art form. Wake up, run 3 miles, lift weight for my quads and hamstrings, prepare for a show, do show, lift more weights, sleep. There is never a moment that I lose my drive to be the best. I push until I succeed, I never give up. Even when exhaustion sets in, I stand tall, lock my knees and stay focused. I can keep the weight in the air, even when my body tells me I can't. It's all in the mind. You can succeed if you decide to succeed. You decide how far you can go. You can limit yourself or you can be like me and just keep pushing until you can squat lift 600 pounds. And that's just on a bad day. Everyday, I focus single-mindedly on my one and only goal: to be the strongest person in the world. I can handle anything. Trust me. Anything. So don't baby me or applaud me if I don't deserve it. DON'T try to make me feel good about myself. I don't need your help. I need the weight, the pressure of pounds, the exhilaration of lifting something that's five times heavier than I am. I know what I want and I live the way I need to achieve it. How I feel doesn't matter. It's all about what I can do. How much weight I can lift. How powerful I can become!

(The Strongman throws the dumbbell to let go of weight, then transforms into the Juggler and catches it.)

Juggler:

How many balls can I juggle in the air at one time?

One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six

(He drops it on "Six" and comes back up clinging to one ball.)

Who am I kidding? I can't get myself to throw the ball up in the air. I'd rather just hold it in my hand, feel my grip crushing the ball between my fingers. I'm not feeling adventurous, brave, or fierce. I don't want to be worried about dropping things or letting things slip between my fingers. I want security. I want the certainty that everything is going to work out. Yes, I will bore you, but at least you will never see me make a mistake. You will never see me fail at anything. How many people can say that? That they've never missed the ball, that they have always done everything just as they should. See, you may think that I'm not exciting, but I never feel stressed out or anxious. My heart never races. I am free to enjoy my life, well within my safety limits. This way, I never have to worry about the what ifs that come with taking risks. I'm not plagued by an over-eager imagination that invents different ways in which I can fail. I never put myself in that position. I don't have to question if I will ever drop the ball because I never

throw it. It remains firmly in my hand, safe from the winds of the world or my potentially bad throw. Maybe, I should take up bowling.

(She rolls the crushed ball off stage.)

STRRRRIKKE!!!

(Suddenly, the Juggler holds up her hands defensively to a very unhappy Ringmaster. She transforms into the Ringmaster, whose hands now mime giving balls to the Juggler.)

Ringmaster:

(Whispered to the Juggler) Throw the fucking balls or I'll throw you out. *(To audience)* Haha, ladies and gentlemen, our juggler is just playing with you. Watch carefully and prepare to be astounded!*(Whispered to the Juggler)* Now do it if you want to keep your job!

(A recorded verbal rhythm plays under the Juggler's rap: "Want to keep it, keep your job, job, job.")

Juggler:

What goes up

Must come down

Throw them in a circle

Round, round, round

Balls in the air

Rhythm is clear

Many to spare

Nothing to fear

Love to show off

Name of my game

Don't you scoff

I'm headed for fame

What goes up

Must come down
Throw them in a circle
Round, round, round

One to two
Three to six
All *you* can do
Is play pick-up sticks

High and low
Speed up the pace
In the flow
Nothing to chase

What goes up
Must come down
Throw them in a circle
Round, round, round
(Rap stops.)
Oh shit! I dropped one!

I feel the gaze of the audience pouring over me like a tidal wave. I've dropped the ball. I don't know how I did this, I can't explain how it fell, but it's on the floor. Staring at me. How did I throw it behind me? I was practicing earlier, I've done this routine millions of times, how did I throw it behind me? My mind becomes obsessed with this question. Where did I go wrong? *(Whispers)* The sixth ball... *(Normal voice)* How did I not toss it to the two o'clock position? I always toss it to the two o'clock position. The audience is laughing at me, they're laughing and I want to cry but I'm still juggling the rest of the balls in front of my face. Wait, where's the fifth one? I look up and it's headed for the audience. Oh no, that's not good. Suddenly the laughing stops and a fearful hush confronts me. *(Defends himself)* As if that little ball could even do any damage. *(Questions audience)* Really? Sorry! But now you feel threatened and you want me to

fail. (*Accuses audience*) The glint in your eye distracts me from the four balls I have left. Now one is sailing to my right. I keep trying to understand where I went wrong. And a voice in my head answers,

(Raps, but can't quite keep the beat)

It was the sixth ball,
How stupid of you
Tried to bite off
More'n you could chew.

Challenged yourself
'Stead of being content
Now you've ruined
This entire event

Too many balls
Let everyone down
What were you thinking
Sillier than a clown

Did this to yourself
Only one to blame
Failed your routine
You should be ashamed

What goes up
Must come down
Balls have disappeared
Somewhere on the ground

The three remaining balls fall in my face. You fool. You're so fired.

(Juggler is hyperventilating and ends up collapsing on the Lion's stand. She transforms into the Fat Lady.)

The Fat Lady:

Who am I? I gave up on myself. I let myself become this. Maple doughnuts from the Sweet Doughnut Shop in Sugarbush, Vermont. I wasn't always like this. I used to be happy, the girl who always had a smile on her face, the girl who dreamed of becoming an actress. The girl who rejoiced in little things, who loved openly and deeply. Beignets from Café du Monde in New Orleans. A girl vulnerable to the atrocities of the world, open to the pain of others, too empathetic for my own good. So young. So inexperienced. Strawberry Ice Cream on a waffle cone from The Scoop in California. If only I had known the danger then, before I let myself go, perhaps I could've saved myself from this fate, but I was naive. I thought the world was a good place. I thought I was a good person, but in the back of my mind, the fear of never being good enough began to eat away at me. Peach and berry pie from Stehekin Valley. Life began to confirm my doubts. The guys that took my number and never called. Chocolate Dipped Strawberries from Godiva. The letters from all the colleges telling me that I was rejected. Eggs Benedict and Pancakes from Comforts. The girls who hid in the bathroom to keep from having to hang out with me, the new girl. I didn't understand...I was in fifth grade, people had always trusted me, I had been the peacemaker at my old school, what was wrong with me? Cinnamon sugar pretzel from Auntie Anne's. Or my dreams of being an actress. When my drama teacher humiliated me in front of the entire class telling me that I was too self-conscious...I'm sure that helped. A kid who I never talked to came up to me after class and asked if I was ok...I wanted to burst into tears and say well except for my shattered self-esteem, I'm fine, but I plastered a fake smile on my face and told him, Yeah, I'm fine. A twenty-ounce porterhouse steak from Hawksmoor with mashed potatoes and mac-n-cheese. Or when a director who I had really looked up to told me, "I thought you were a better actress than you actually are. You can't act. You just use your emotions to fool people into thinking you can. If I had a month, I might be able to help you, but at this point, there is nothing I can do for you!" Rice Crispy Treats from Einstein's Brothers Bagels. I just wanted to disappear and gorge myself on the pain of her words. I had to perform the next day. You can imagine how I felt, like I didn't deserve to be there. Instead, I went onstage, feeling ashamed and exposed. Afterwards, I comforted myself with

food, padding myself from the world. The pounds packed on and it only led me to feel more worthless and ugly than ever before. I felt sorry for myself so I ate, I ate too much so I gained more weight, I felt like I'd already failed myself, so I ate more to console myself. It got to the point where I thought, What's the point? — so I just let myself go...and the rest is history. In six years, I went from 130 pounds to God only knows how much I weigh now. I remember stepping on the scale and seeing that I'd gained more weight and going to eat a pint of Ben and Jerry's ice cream to make myself feel better. Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough. What started out as padding became a barrier and now I'm trapped. Isolated: never hanging out with other people, let alone going out to eat with them. I can't stand the "poor you" look in their eyes or the caution in their speech as they try not to say anything offensive. It's better to be on this stage, trapped in the sideshow of a circus than in my life. Here, at least, I'm in control. I allow you to see me, to judge me, to make fun of me. And in your eyes, I see the reflection of myself: frustrated, fearful, and fat. That's me. Sad isn't it?

But the saddest part is not that I see myself through others' eyes instead of my own. It's that, now those eyes are my own. I see what you all see when you look at me: the fat of my failure. So take a good look, everyone, isn't that what you came to see? Don't you feel better about yourselves now? You can think to yourself, at least I'm not as heavy as she is, at least I can still walk properly instead of waddling, at least I'm not that ugly.

People ask me if I'm ok, but they don't really care, so I just plaster a fake smile on my face and say, "Yeah, I'm fine." But the truth is I'm not. I'm morbidly...unhappy and food is my only joy. Chocolate cake from the Cheesecake Factory. Oh don't you dare look at me like that! I don't want your pity.

(The light comes up on more of audience and we see her transform into Ringmaster, who is apologetic about and annoyed with what just happened.)

Ringmaster:

Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages! Cast your eyes way up high and prepare for the spectacle of spectacles as we watch her fly!!!

(Spotlight is now on the Trapeze Artist holding a bar suspended by ropes. She is climbing up to it.)

Trapeze Artist:***Flying, Freedom, Flipping, Free Fall, Frozen, Fixed, Freaked-out***

I have one foot still on the platform as I gaze into the empty space that lies before me. I'm not ready. Can I take the leap into the great unknown? I can feel my toes curling against the metal of the platform. I'm sweating. I'm scared. I can feel every part of myself wanting to cling to the stability that still holds me safely in place. Fear is crawling through my eyes into my brain and I am blinded into seeing only my point of view. I remember my mom asking me, "Can't you be excited about where you're going?" I look at her as if she's crazy. She is crazy, I mean, whatever, how can something that unknown be exciting. "Possibilities are endless," she says. But all I can see is the large flashing neon sign in front of me, lighting up CHANGE every other second. Change, Change, Change. I don't want to change. I like myself the way I am. Yes, maybe there are things that I could improve upon, maybe there are even some things that I really dislike about myself, but all in all I can't complain. Plus, change is such a big, scary word, and there are no guarantees if I let go. For all I know, I could end up worse off and even more miserable than I am now. I have to remember that change is not my friend. After all, past experiences proved that to me. Moving, changing schools, always on the road, living in a new place. Yes, maybe for the first few weeks it's awfully exciting, a grand adventure, because around every corner there is something new, something you've never seen before; but before long, you realize you've just left everything you've ever known and all the friends you love and the house you grew up in, and the place you are now doesn't compare to what you had before. So does it really make sense for me to give up all I have? To just let myself go, let myself change? Whatever. I mean I do kind of drive myself crazy sometimes. And I don't always pay attention to my own needs and desires. And maybe I don't really take very good care of myself. Does it even matter? And yes, there are even times where I just can't stand being myself anymore. Like just cannot stand it anymore. And this feeling just builds up in me that rebels against this fake sense of satisfaction. I can't resist it. It defies my whatever. And I want more. I want much more. I reach out for more and suddenly-

(She swings forward.)

Freely Flowing, Flipping Forward, Fast, Faster, Freeeeeeeee!

Feeling a sense of adventure, of possibility, my heart beats faster. I can feel the air whip against my face, blowing my hair back, rosyng my cheeks. Ahhh...I can take a deep breath, feeling my

momentum carry me to the other side. I can see the platform as I am speeding towards it. I reach out to grab it...

(Her hand slips. She swings backward.)

Fumbled, Furious, Floundering, Failed

I can see is myself falling back into the old me—the me who always puts herself last, the me who doesn't think she's worth it, the me who can't stand being me.

(She starts swinging forward again. Like a pendulum now getting smaller and smaller.)

Fabulous Feeling, Fun, Fully Feisty

Ahhhhhh- I love this. I love being me. Taking good care of myself, being true to my-

(She swings backward.)

Fake, Feeble, Fraud

(She starts swinging forward again.)

Fresh Faith

(She swings back.)

Fragmented Fear

(Forward)

Faith

(Back)

Fear

(Forward)

Faith

(She comes to a stop in the middle.)

Faith you win, Fear you lose

(Lights dim on her as she continues to repeat this phrase. She lets go of the trapeze swing and begins walking behind the audience. Just as the stage reaches a blackout, the voice of the elephant is heard.)

Elephant:

Remember Louise.

You are who you are.

No more,

No less.

Live life,

Here and Now.

Keep life simple.

Remember Louise

Remember...

(We hear the voice of the Elephant Rider from behind the audience and lights come up on an empty stage.)

Elephant Rider:

I never really knew my mother. My grandmother had always raised me—she would rarely ever speak of her daughter except to tell me how much like her I was. My grandmother used to tell me stories about the circus when I was a girl. She would whisper in my ear the adventurous tales of a young innocent who ran away to join the hustle and bustle of strange people and animals and audience members, all migrating in and out of a big white and red striped tent. “Back in the day,” she said, “we had to do everything by hand. It was good to be a woman back then because all we had to do was look pretty, while the men would put up and break down the circus.” Every time, I would giggle as she expected and she would tap me on the nose. “You remind me so much of your mother. Oh you giggly girl.” Sometimes, she would get this look in her eyes and say, “You have that same...” but she would never finish the sentence. *(Stands up)* She would just stand there staring at me. *(Moves toward the light)* I used to gaze at myself in the mirror, tracing my features, trying to figure out what of me I shared with my mother. Was it my nose, my mouth, my eyes? I would imagine what she looked like, how beautiful she must have been. How much she looked like my grandmother. Had she ridden elephants as well? But I could never ask that question...*(Sits as Madame Soleil)* My grandmother was Madame Soleil, one of the most famous, beautiful elephant riders in the history of the circus. I remember watching her as a young girl with the shimmer of her costume as the light fell upon her. She sparkled up there like a diamond for all the world to see. Thoroughly beautiful, she sat proudly like a queen. I used to try to imitate her in the mirror, smiling and waving as she did. But I never felt like I had what she had. She could make the whole audience come alive with the wave of her hand. *(Waves)* She was everything I was not. One day, she found me practicing in the mirror. “Louise, what do

you think you're doing? What, you're practicing my wave, trying to imitate me? You'll never be like me. You don't have the charm or allure to be an elephant rider. I forbid you to ever get on an elephant. You belong on the ground. You need to listen, Louise. Listen to what I'm saying. No, you're not listening! You're never going to – I ran out of the tent (*Runs out of the light*). I couldn't take it anymore. Her eyes erased me with everything that was wrong with me. They scrutinized me until there was nothing left. I wanted to show my grandma that there was more to me than what she could see. I wanted to prove to her that I could do it. I went to the elephant arena—the place I was forbidden to go. I walked in, expecting to jump on the closest elephant I could find. And then, she touched me...

(Elephant Rider transforms into the Elephant.)

Elephant:

Love

You are loved

Hurt

Your heart hurts

Not alone

Can feel

Your loss

You know

You know how she went

Hard to say

Hard to hear

Your Mom

On my back

Last trick

Her foot slipped

She slid

Off my back

Her breath

Last words

Love Louise

Love her for me
My trunk nudged her
Held her
Breath
No more
I mourned her
Now here you are
Same big eyes
You want to know
Why
Why her life
Why she stayed
On the ground
Oh, sweet child
Now you see
The truth
You must
Move on
It is life
Hard
But good
Be who you are
The real you
The you
You see
In my eye

(Elephant transitions to Elephant Rider.)

Elephant Rider:

Everything stopped. I just remember forgetting. Forgetting what I was going to do or why I'd come. I just stared into her big, beautiful eye. She saw all the things that forever went unsaid, the fact that my mother had missed her footing while flipping backwards and had died within the

ring. She didn't just pretend to know the pain I felt—she knew it even better than me. But her world was not colored by it. She had accepted the death as a part of life, simply the way of the world, the unpredictability of nature. Unlike my grandmother, she could see me for me, not for my mother. She understood me. The lonely me, who wanted so badly to be loved by her grandmother. The confused me, who yearned for answers that would tell her who she was. The me, who wanted to know where she belonged. She saw my many selves and loved me for all of them. The twinkle in her eye told me that for the first time in my life, I was being seen for who I truly was. And I finally saw myself clearly in the reflection of her eye. I was no longer a mask of my mother's features, but my own face. In the gaze of her eye, I felt complete. I had found the answer to all my questions. I knew who I was—what I was meant to do. I was meant to be an elephant rider, just like my mother and my grandmother. As if she had heard my thoughts, her trunk began to move. I followed. She guided me to her side, bowing down so that I could climb up onto her back. And when she stood all the way up, I was on top of the world. I just remember sitting there and enjoying the solidness of her back, holding me high above the ground. I could've stayed there forever. I had finally found my home. My grandmother came in, screaming, "You fool, you fool, what are you doing up there? Get down immediately, get down before you get hurt." I smiled at her and shrugged, "I can't do that, this is where I belong. You more than anyone else should understand what this feels like. I love you, but if you love me, you have to understand..." She looked at me for a long time, a mixture of fear and understanding blazing in her eyes and then stepped aside. This was where I belonged. She knew it and so did I. Then, forward we go, entering the arena with the audience all around me. I am at home. As I wave, they come alive!

(Lights fade out on Elephant Rider smiling and waving at the audience. Right before it goes fully dark, the voice of the Ringmaster is heard. Lights up.)

Ringmaster:

Ha ha ha

You think you know me

You think you really do

But all you can see

Is what I want you to

Smile bright for the camera
Look like I'm having fun
No one will ever notice
My mascara will not run

This need for control gets in my way
I try to control it, but it's here to stay
It tangles me up in drama and despair
And so I hide behind my long red hair

So thank you for coming
To bear witness to my show
By chance is there a character
That you too truly know

5

Rehearsing and Performing My Piece

I have been in rehearsal many times in my life, but nothing quite prepared me for what it was like to write and rehearse my own show. I had already been exploring on my feet as I developed the characters, but rehearsal of the finished script was a different experience. I spent over forty hours alone in an empty rehearsal room talking to myself. It was extremely challenging to stay focused and not feel utterly foolish; the sound of my own voice talking to empty space would too often pull me out of the reality of the play. Here is an excerpt from my rehearsal journal after my first week:

I'm not sure I can do this. Being alone is proving to be very distracting for me. I can't seem to get my focus and I don't have anyone here to help me. Instead of being productive, I keep getting frustrated and angry by the little progress I'm making. Something needs to change. I'm driving myself crazy...

Quite quickly, I discovered that by closing my eyes at the beginning rehearsal, I could imagine the world of my circus and enter into it. I would talk to my reflection in the rehearsal hall mirror in which I explored specific ways for my characters to move. Warming up with music became part of my routine as it grounded me in my body and helped me to arrive in the space. I began to enjoy immersing myself in the world of the circus. While I watched YouTube videos of lions, I paid special attention to their movement, then spent time mimicking them in the mirror. I wanted to feel the suppleness of their movement in my body, the intense focus of their gaze in my eyes. Even before the set was built, the circus became very real to me. Sometimes, I would lose myself in the all too familiar thoughts and energies of certain characters, and I would

have trouble leaving them behind in the rehearsal room. Certain characters liked to follow me home more than others; when I became aware that I was still feeling a certain character even after I had stopped rehearsing, I would make a conscious effort to let that character go.

The empty space of the rehearsal room soon became a haven for me: I would often arrive late at night when the building was deserted and I could be alone. As I rehearsed more, the space also became charged with excitement, as there was infinite potential for me to investigate and develop the characters. I found that I knew some of the characters as well as the back of my hands, and I could slip in and out of them like silk gloves. Other characters, however, were more problematic; I had to be careful not to fall into stereotypes and generalizations. I had trouble with the Lion Tamer, for example, because I had given him a mask that reflected my unconscious judgment of him. My mentor, Tim McDonough, advised me to let go of the mask and tap into the inferiority of the character in order to act his superiority; this freed me to empathize with the character and breathe more dimension into the role. The journal entry for one of my final rehearsals reads:

It's a show. I've actually managed to create a show! I can't believe it came together. I felt fairly grounded in my body tonight and feel like I'm starting to get into the rhythm of the show. I want to work on further embodying the characters and distinguishing their voices in performance. I need to be clear about the energies associated with the different characters and build that further into the show. I also need to be sure to slow down enough to tell the story and really live each one. I really need to work on the trapeze artist and develop the opposites of "whatever" vs. wanting to be all she can be and her trepidation vs. her headstrongness. I also need to practice with the trapeze more so I get a greater

sense of moving forward and back, showing the faith and fear in my body...I do have a feeling that I can do this now. I just need to remember to breathe and stay present in each and every moment, living through the shapes of each character.

Performance

Performing this piece was really frightening for me because it allowed people to see under the surface of my public persona. Several characters in *The Circus of Myself* embody my tendency to hide behind my smile, so that people never think anything is wrong. Although I am a private person, in this piece I was inviting everyone to see the inner workings of my mind – what’s going on behind the scenes. I was apprehensive about whether the audience would grasp what I was trying to do. Would they be able to relate to the piece? Would they see parts of themselves in my characters? I was concerned that it might be misinterpreted as a self-indulgent rant, and not the transformative theater piece that I had tried to create. Although I was worried about what people would think, I realized that the show I had written expressed these concerns at the very beginning. The Ringmaster says, “You know what, maybe you should all just leave, get out while you still can. I wish I could...” Once I had said that line, the momentum of the show carried me through to the end. I didn’t have time to question myself after that. I just had to surrender and follow the flow, allowing myself to morph from one character to the next. After I started the piece, it took me on its journey to the end. This is part of my performance journal after my first night of performing for an audience:

They laughed, and then I knew that I was not alone in this journey. It was unbelievable to have a real audience tonight because the people I have been talking to were actually there. It was interesting too because I feel like the

audience responded to the role in which they were cast and gave me something to play off of. Having them there to watch drove my characters to be more themselves. One such example is the stillness in the room during the Fat Lady, which only made me more resentful...I so enjoyed having an audience! Now, I'm both nervous and excited for tomorrow!

In terms of whether or not this piece was able to do for me what it did for the members of the Mirrors back in the 1980s, I am not really sure; only time will truly tell. Perhaps, some months from now, I will return to the survey I sent to the audiences after the performance and answer my own questions. Rehearsing these circus characters did make me more aware of how these personas play in my own life, how they get in my way, or how I might use them to help me move forward. Either way, the show must go on, and as my Dad always says, "This ain't no dress rehearsal, this is your life. Live it to the max."

6

Feedback

I was truly humbled by the positive responses that I received and impressed by the honesty with which people were willing to answer my questions. I have included specific feedback from the Talkback, Comment Cards, and Survey below.

Talkback and Comment Cards

Overview

The Talkback occurred directly after the performance on both nights and consisted of my asking the audience questions about their reaction to the performance. I also passed out a comment card on which audience members could write down responses if they did not want to speak publicly or if they had something more they would like to share. On Wednesday night, the talkback lasted about 35 minutes and the audience was very responsive to the questions. On Thursday night, it lasted about 20 minutes, with an equally vocal audience, who were mostly students; this influenced the talkback, as it was not an intergenerational discussion. Two of the reactions that surfaced both nights were how uncomfortable the Fat Lady made everyone feel and how many related to the issues of the Tightrope Walker. A lot of people voiced an interest in this type of work; many felt that the circus had been a good metaphor for the show.

Questions

1. Do you think the circus theme was a good backdrop for my stories?

2. Did you identify with a certain character or characters more than with others?
(Ringmaster, Tightrope Walker, Lion Tamer, Lion, Clown, Strongman, Juggler, Fat Lady, Trapeze Artist, Elephant, Elephant Rider) If so, which one(s)? Why, do you think?
3. Do you feel like you've learned anything about yourself?
4. Which character did you like the most and why?
5. Which character made you the most uncomfortable and why?
6. Does this type of work interest you? Would you consider trying it yourself? If so, what sort of metaphor might you use for your cast of characters, if not a circus?
7. Any last comments?

Excerpts from Talkback

“For our generation we feel like we can't fail, that there is no room for mistakes. And that's because it's true. The competition for us is a lot worse than for previous generations. I can give all kinds of economic reasons for it: a policy of increased flexibility in the labor market brought on by neo-liberalism, labor elasticity brought on by globalization, competition which causes a race to the top in "ability" (more extracurriculars, more unpaid internships, more masters degrees, higher GPAs) but a race to the bottom in quality of life. In all causes a feeling of precariousness, of living on a tightrope. Some people succeed and some fail, but all are a lot tireder.” (Talkback after First Performance on Wednesday, March 21)

“I would definitely be interested in trying this work; however, I think I would maybe use the metaphor of a sports teams with all the different positions and each character could be

represented by a different position.” (Talkback after Second Performance on Thursday, March 22)

“ You put on a performance which made me think about how I am one person yet I am never just one person, merely the sum of my experiences and the context I am viewing myself in. Many of the revelations were quite sobering. The way you captured the vulnerabilities of each character is what made each character so understandable and approachable, which is what I think you were going for.” (Talkback, First Performance)

“It was really great to have the circus theme in which all these characters could exist, but I could still see all these characters outside of the circus and that’s what kind of established this really beautiful metaphor the whole time.” (Talkback, Second Performance)

“Maybe the clown was popping anti-depressants.” (Talkback, First Performance)

“I think at times the Tightrope Walker...because I think we’ve all been in that position where we’re not sure we’re doing something right, and we second guess ourselves and we have that anxiety in trying to figure out what it is exactly we want to do and then we sort of can’t do anything because of that – I think that is very relatable.” (Talkback, Second Performance)

“I can definitely relate to the Tightrope Walker because my parents have always been very supportive of me and I’m about to graduate and enter the world on my own.” (Talkback, First Performance)

“The Fat Lady was the most effective for me and I think part of that was that you were so static so...visually it was a performance of your mind or your words. And the fact that we’re sitting it was a lot more intimate. And then also, just the references to real places and real food – it was a lot more grounded outside this theater. The way that you said food was a lot more visceral in the entire experience.” (Talkback, Second Performance)

“Honestly, I felt like it was all disturbing. There was like a positive feeling because it is so natural to gravitate towards the Lion Tamer when it was happening, or the Juggler when it was happening cause you see different aspects of yourself within each of the characters. And it’s like so captivating because it’s like oh that’s exactly how I am at some points and then when the next act would come on – like that’s how I am as well. It shows the different sides of you: how multifaceted a person is in general.” (Talkback, Second Performance)

Excerpts from Comment Cards

[Did you identify with a certain character or characters more than with others?] “Tightrope Walker, Juggler because of their need for perfection, I often feel the need to be perfect.”

(Comment Card, Second Performance).

“I’ve never been a big circus fan, but it served as a great structure for the different archetypes/personalities.” (Comment Card, First Performance)

“I truly enjoyed all of [the characters]. The top 3 to bring about an emotional connection were: Tightrope Walker, Juggler, and Fat Lady. They all said some really interesting things that hit pretty close to home.” (Comment Card, First Performance)

“Lion Tamer: being overly confident

Strongman: single-minded dedication

Juggler: taking on too much and not taking enough chances

Elephant: wanting to help and ground others.” (Comment Card, First Performance)

[Which character made you the most uncomfortable and why?] “Fat Lady. Obesity is an uncomfortable subject in today’s culture.” (Comment Card, Second Performance)

[Which character did you like the most and why?] “The Lion Tamer/Lion dynamic was super interesting because two antagonistic characters were revealed to be essentially the same. I think the strength/weakness duality is there for all of us.” (Comment Card, Second Performance)

“I most identified with the Fat Lady – each character demonstrated an insecurity as well as a unique talent/trait, but his character’s insecurity was her talent as well. I greatly identified with her back-story.”(Comment Card, First Performance)

[Which character did you like the most and why?] “Elephant Rider – There was this incredible sense of uplifting change, movement into hope and beauty.” (Comment Card, Second Performance)

[Which character did you like the most and why?] “Juggler—sure of their act—rhythm/motion/process—liked the contrast between good presentation (façade) while struggling internally (doubt).” (Comment Card, First Performance)

“I am amazed by this work, because each of the characters made me consider part of myself, bringing about real emotions at times” (Comment Card, Second Performance).

[Which character did you like the most and why?] “The Tightrope Walker because I could see myself so clearly and just being like that is scary. It was the areas which I identified with that put me on guard. But that’s the point, so good job!” (Comment Card, First Performance).

[Did you identify with a certain character or characters more than with others? If so, which one(s)? Why, do you think?] “Lion – too often feel like I have to withhold some rather fundamental desires for power. Although I have witnessed that *I* am the one to dismiss these desires, instead of a cage as in the case of the lion. I also related strongly with the battle between the Lion and Lion Tamer, a perfect metaphor for this dichotomy and conflict within me” (Comment Card, First Performance).

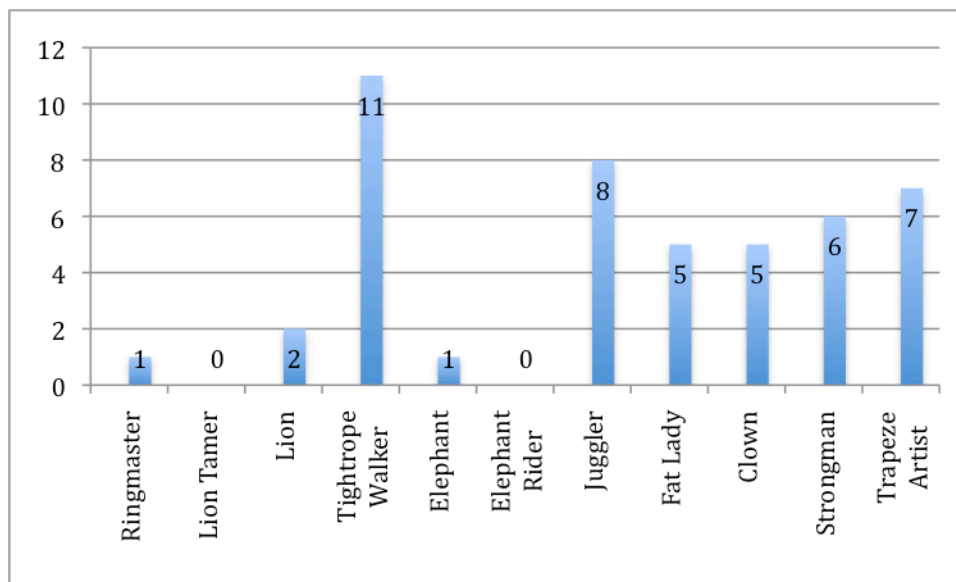
The Survey

Overview

The survey was sent out four or five days after the performances to garner people’s feedback on *The Circus of Myself* after having digested it for a few days. Out of the 26 people to

whom I sent it, 15 responded and gave me some type of feedback. The results showed that 50% of people thought about the show “a fair bit” in the days after it, followed by 28.6% of people who thought about it “some” during that time. No one had thought not at all about the show. 14 out of 15 people, or 93.3 %, recognized at least one of the behavioral patterns portrayed either in themselves or in others. Figure 1 shows how many people identified with each specific character. Notably, the Tightrope Walker had the highest number of people who identified with her: 11 out of 15 people. Some of the common moments that stuck with people were “the image of the fat lady, sitting on the chair illuminated by soft, blue light” or “tightrope walker stuck in one place, unable to move forward or backward.” People also seemed to respond really well to the physical realization of the Trapeze Artist and the metaphor of change that she represented. All in all, I was impressed by people’s willingness to reflect on themselves.

Figure 1. People Identified with Specific Characters



Survey Questions

1. Have you thought about *The Circus of Myself* in the past few days?
2. Have you recognized in yourself or in people you know any of the behavioral patterns

you saw in the characters onstage? If yes, please explain.

3. Which of the character or characters did you especially identify with?
4. Has your answer to the last question changed over the past few days?
5. If yes, why, do you think?
6. Are there any moments that seem to stick in your mind? Any text? Any images?
7. Do you feel like watching the piece has been helpful to you in any way? Please explain.
8. Does this type of work interest you? Would you consider trying it yourself? If so, what sort of metaphor might you use for your cast of characters, if not a circus?
9. Other comments?

Excerpts from the Survey Responses

[Have you recognized in yourself or in people you know any of the behavioral patterns you saw in the characters onstage? If yes, please explain.] “The Tightrope Walker - too terrified to move forward and too stubborn to walk back. At times I feel a lot like that, tough to keep walking sometimes, but never willing to give up.”

[Have you recognized in yourself or in people you know any of the behavioral patterns you saw in the characters onstage? If yes, please explain.] “The eating of the Fat Lady. The sense of enclosure of the Lion. The precarious nature of modern existence I think was present in many of the pieces.”

“Especially on Emory's campus, I see and have experienced myself the emotional withdrawal of the Tightrope Walker and Strongman. The Strongman is goal driven to the point of a loss of humanity: emotion. The Tightrope Walker is all about holding all your emotion in, and parading

around as though nothing is wrong.”

“I’m attracted to my memories of it, but have mixed feelings about the setting of a circus, where every act is precarious and the stakes are high. Right now, I could use some lower stakes!”

“It helped me realize that I really do fear some parts of my behavior that I know are there, yet I don’t want to acknowledge or address for fear that I won’t be successful in changing how I act.”

“The piece was emotionally intense. I think seeing how I can have my self in pieces is a way of understanding (and hopefully learning about) my behavior.”

“Anytime that theater has the ability to make you feel happy and sad within an hour – something good has to come from that. For the first time in as long as I can remember I was on the verge of actually crying in a theater – and it was exhilarating.”

“I have thought about the Trapeze Artist a lot as it has given me this strong visceral sensation of the forward positive momentum in my life vs. the fear of falling back into habits I am trying to change about myself. It has been revelatory to experience making positive choices simply with the idea in mind that all I really have to do is to swing forward, and that daring to take this action will push me forward giving me that "yes" feeling of the wind in my face that I crave.”

“This work definitely interests me – I think it was fantastically creative and extremely well-executed. While I don’t suspect I will be doing much theater in my life, this work inspires me to

try to write short stories again... I also can't think of another metaphor, as I think this was the perfect choice!”

“I can still see the Elephant Rider waving.”

[Do you feel like watching the piece has been helpful to you in any way? Please explain.] “The Fat Lady. Having spent much of my life as a chunky individual, and using eating as a coping mechanism, it really stuck with me.”

“I have realized over the past few days that I am part of all these characters. The characters that stood out to me when I first saw the show were the selves that represent part of myself that I am least happiest with (very Trapeze Artist of me...)”

“I remember the fear of change/must change to progress section of the trapeze artist, as this was the most profound and resonant section of the piece. It was an extraordinarily complex concept that was very simply framed in a simple context of one simple action, the action to move forward.”

[Does this type of work interest you? Would you consider trying it yourself? If so, what sort of metaphor might you use for your cast of characters, if not a circus?]

“Yes, perhaps, yet not to the same degree of depth as you have. I think using colors, or days of the week would be interesting.”

“It helped me to see the different parts of myself in a new light and see my problems as more universal, or at least shared.”

“This piece has changed the way that I view myself.”

Conclusion

Drama therapy builds on the healing power of theater. For the most part, it focuses on the reenactment of real events from patients’ lives, and it happens in the closed circle of a therapy group; it is not performed for a general audience. While I was inspired by the interactive techniques of a drama therapy session, I wanted to explore how theater itself can be a therapeutic process. In retrospect, what I did was create a carefully shaped and rehearsed solo theater piece, grounded in the metaphor of a circus, with distinctly therapeutic goals. Its creation gave me the opportunity to reflect on personal behavioral patterns. Its performance invited the audience to see my cast of characters and, in turn, to reflect on their own. For my thesis, I created a performance that would have therapeutic value not only for me, but for its audience. This experience proves theater can be a healing art.

I conceived my thesis as a two part process: first, to write and perform a one-woman show based on a theatrical self-exploration, in which I examined the various personas within my identity and the ways in which they affect my life; second, to get feedback from the audience to investigate whether watching the show was meaningful or helpful to them. Based on my research, I hypothesized that my performance piece would act as a mirror in which my audience and I could examine and reflect on ourselves. I found that the piece was indeed helpful in making me aware of my own characters and how they influence my life. Above all, I realized

that these characters are part of who I am and to some extent, necessary to my life. But they are now *characters*, and I have more choice about how much time they spend on the stage of my life.

The feedback provided evidence that this work was meaningful for the audience, as it inspired them to reflect on their own personas. Through *The Circus of Myself*, I was able to instill a greater awareness, both in the audience and in myself, regarding the cast of characters that we perform as part of our everyday lives. By performing my piece, I allowed people to see themselves more clearly in the mirror of myself.

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