

Chapter 20: Finding Your Voice: Communal Rhythms and Theater

Chapter 20: In the world of acting, it's often said that the true essence of a character isn't something you simply put on but rather discover within yourself. The actor doesn't fabricate a persona but instead taps into an expanded version of their own identity, bringing out qualities they might not have fully realized were there. This process of self-discovery is crucial in both professional and therapeutic theater, where acting becomes more than just a performance; it becomes a method of healing and self-expression.

For many, the therapeutic potential of theater is most evident in how it can help individuals recover from deep personal trauma. One example of this is seen through the story of Nick, the author's son, who suffered from chronic fatigue syndrome and became withdrawn and isolated due to his health struggles. When his mother recognized that Nick found some energy in the evenings, they enrolled him in an improvisational theater class. Initially, it was a way to get him engaged with others, but over time, Nick's participation in theater provided him with something much deeper: a chance to embody a different version of himself. The more he performed, the more he rediscovered his confidence and sense of self-worth. The acting exercises, such as playing tough, authoritative roles like Action in *West Side Story* and the Fonz in *Happy Days*, gave him a new sense of agency and physicality, allowing him to imagine himself as someone powerful, respected, and in control. This transformation in Nick's self-perception, thanks to theater, was instrumental in his emotional and psychological recovery, ultimately helping him embrace his creative and confident adulthood.

The therapeutic effects of theater extend beyond individual stories like Nick's, reaching entire communities and groups, especially those dealing with trauma or emotional distress. The author draws a parallel with veterans, noting how their participation in a theatrical production in the late '80s helped them process their experiences with PTSD. When these veterans, who had been receiving therapy at a VA clinic, joined forces with playwright David Mamet to create a script about their experiences, the power of acting took hold. This involvement was transformative—far more so than traditional therapy—as the veterans were able to confront their trauma publicly, with the added support of professional actors like Al Pacino and Michael J. Fox. Their performance was not just a way to raise awareness but a profound healing experience that allowed them to publicly process their trauma and reconnect with their humanity. This form of cathartic theater allowed these individuals to transform painful memories into a collective narrative, helping them regain their sense of self and a deeper understanding of their own emotional journeys.

The role of communal rhythms and theater in trauma recovery also echoes through various cultural practices, where collective movement and expression have been used for centuries to heal and unite communities. From ancient Greek tragedies to modern-day rituals, theater and communal performance have long served as vehicles for confronting deep emotional pain and societal issues. In fact, the ancient Greeks used theater as a form of civic healing, especially for returning war veterans, who were often the audience for plays like Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. The communal aspect of theater—where the audience's emotional reactions are visible to all—allowed for a collective experience of grief, trauma, and reconciliation. This approach of integrating theater with the lived experiences of individuals facing war, loss, and injustice has continued through modern projects like Bryan Doerries' *Theater of War*, which has used Greek dramas to help combat veterans and their families navigate the effects of PTSD. By immersing audiences in these ancient stories of trauma, sacrifice, and justice, modern theater has provided a space for survivors of violence to connect, process, and heal.

Through the continued exploration of theater as a therapeutic tool, various programs have emerged that help people confront trauma by engaging with the deep, emotional themes present in theatrical works. One notable example is the Possibility Project in New York, where youth in foster care write and perform their own musical productions, delving into personal stories and collective themes. This process empowers young people to express emotions they may have repressed, providing them with a platform to process their past while simultaneously developing skills that will help them navigate life's challenges. In this environment, theater becomes a pathway for self-empowerment, allowing participants to take control of their stories and transform their trauma into something creative and powerful. Similarly, Shakespeare in the Courts provides juvenile offenders with a structured space to confront their inner conflicts through the language of Shakespeare, a therapeutic technique that encourages emotional release and connection. By engaging with these powerful works, participants learn to channel their personal struggles into art, finding solace and strength in the process.

Ultimately, the therapeutic potential of theater lies in its ability to foster a deep connection between individuals and their emotions, allowing them to safely explore complex feelings of grief, anger, and loss. It is a powerful tool that can help individuals reclaim their agency, find their voice, and reconnect with their bodies and their sense of self. Through acting, whether on the stage or in therapeutic settings, people are given the chance to embody and express emotions that might otherwise be too overwhelming to face. As these stories illustrate, theater is not merely an artistic endeavor; it is a form of emotional and psychological healing, one that taps into the deepest parts of ourselves and helps us confront the past, process our trauma, and step into the future with renewed strength and purpose.