

The future of drama therapy

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Abstract

The author surveys the discipline of drama therapy as it exists in 2005 and discusses its current identity as a profession, including its strengths and weaknesses in terms of training, theory and practice, research and mentoring. While offering a critical perspective, the author looks toward the future, elaborating upon the challenges facing drama therapists and offering a vision of where the field ought to be headed.

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What is drama therapy?

Drama therapy is one of the several expressive or creative arts therapies, among which are art therapy, bibliotherapy, dance/movement therapy, music therapy, poetry therapy and psychodrama. Drama therapy concerns a relationship between a therapist and a client or clients who attempt to make sense of their life experience as they engage partly or fully in a creative process, in this case through the media of drama and theatre. These media include, but are not limited to, storytelling and storymaking, role-playing and role-reversal, improvisation, mask and puppet play, sandplay, play therapy, rehearsal and theatrical performance. The clients are the ones who work toward making sense of their lives. The drama therapists are the guides that help the client along the way through applying any number of techniques, approaches and theoretical frameworks. Most importantly, drama therapists help their clients through examining their own temperaments, affective styles, personal strengths and weaknesses, guiding principles and biases, and using what they know to be true about themselves in the service of their client's search for meaning. This last statement could be true for all therapists. It might be particularly true for those drama therapists who directly engage in the drama with their clients and therefore, need to be especially adept at separating out their issues from those of their clients.

The present identity of drama therapy

Drama therapy is practiced throughout North America and is represented by three fully developed, university-based drama therapy programs—at California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, as part of a counseling psychology department; at New York University, as part of a performing arts department; and at Concordia University in Montreal, as part of a creative arts therapy department. Drama therapists are represented in North America by the National Association for Drama Therapy (NADT), which registers qualified practitioners, monitors standards and ethics and sponsors an annual conference as well as local conferences throughout the year. One more recent innovation is the

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development of the alternative training program where qualified individuals with MA degrees in disciplines related to drama therapy can study and eventually practice drama therapy without graduating from one of the three approved programs. Further, in the US, a number of drama therapy institutes have developed to train students privately and to help alternative track students achieve the goal of becoming professional, registered drama therapists. These institutes usually represent a particular approach in the field, such as developmental transformations, narrative drama therapy and transpersonal drama therapy. Institutes include the Drama Therapy Institute of Los Angeles, the Institute for Healing and Wellness and Omega Theatre in Boston, the Institutes for the Arts in Psychotherapy in New York City, Stop-Gap Institute in California and courses at Hunter College in New York and Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. There are also private organizations that practice drama therapy but refer generally to their work as educational or performance-based, such as Creative Alternatives of New York (CANY) Enact and Hospital Audiences (HAI), all located in New York City.

Internationally, there are organized communities of drama therapists in the UK, represented by the organization BADth, the British Association of Drama Therapists. There are several drama therapy programs based in universities and private institutes. Most offer postgraduate diplomas. One, at the University of Surrey Roehampton in the UK, offers an MA and also a Ph.D., the only one of its kind in the world. In Holland, DT is taught on the undergraduate level. In Greece, there are two private training programs. In Israel, there are two academic programs, one at an affiliate of Lesley University, offering an MA; the other at Tel Hai College, offering a certification in drama therapy. Other courses and workshop trainings not leading to a full-blown degree or certificate take place in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Italy, Germany, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea.

The strengths and weaknesses of the profession

How strong is the field of drama therapy, and is it a growing field with the potential to achieve a status commensurate with its related arts therapies and mental health professions? I will start with the good news that New York State has a new law in place that will license MA-level drama therapists on an equal basis with other creative arts therapists and with counselors and psychoanalysts. This is a rather stunning breakthrough that bodes well for the future of the field, at least in New York State. I will limit my remarks generally to the situation in America and base the next statements and questions on the data provided by the NADT.

By the numbers, the field has been growing. In 1984, there were 164 members in the NADT. In 1996, there were 300, almost twice as many. And in 2005, there are 524. So in 20 years, the field has tripled its membership. Of the members who achieve registered drama therapist (RDT) status, there is inconsistent data of clear growth in the past five years. However, one trend is that more alternative track students are applying for and receiving their RDTs as the years go by.

In terms of university-based training programs, the news is not as good. Twenty years ago, there were two NADT approved MA programs in drama therapy in the United States. Today there are three, the new one being in Canada. To take up the slack, several private training institutes have developed, primarily to educate drama therapists within a particular approach.

And finally, I want to mention attendance at annual conferences of the NADT. In the past 20 years, conference attendance has decreased. At the 1985 annual conference in San Francisco, there were more than 300 attendees. In both 1995 at Yale in New Haven and 2004 at Newport, Rhode Island, the number was around 230.

It's not clear what all these numbers mean, as some measures of growth are apparent and some are not as apparent. But I will say this—the numbers are not significant. Even at a total membership of 524, drama therapy is indeed a small field, smaller by far than art, music and dance therapies. Psychodrama, which has traditionally enjoyed a robust membership, is facing some current challenges in terms of membership and attendance at conferences. This could be due to the fact that psychodrama training tends to be institution-based and has not achieved the academic cachet of some other creative arts therapies. Further, psychodrama has been the invention of a single mind or the joint minds of J.L. and Zerka Moreno. Beyond the Morenos there have been many strong leaders who have developed their own institutes and practices. However, with the passing of J.L. and the aging of Zerka Moreno, it is unclear where a field so attached to a single vision is headed.

The fact that there are only three academically-based drama therapy training programs in North America is significant. During the past 20 years, there have been no new fully-blown academic programs in the United States and only one in Canada, which remains rather small in student population. Both NYU and CIIS accept 15–20 new students each

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