

THE CHALLENGE OF DRAMA

“It just happened!” Using Drama as a Direct Challenge to Violence

For the past five years, Geese Theatre Company have been working extensively in both prisons and probation services throughout the British Isles, using theatre and drama techniques as a new and powerful way of confronting offending behaviour. In January this year, Geese began a three year programme for West Midlands Probation Service to work with violent male offenders. This is in addition to other programmes the company are involved in with Hereford & Worcester and Staffordshire Probation Services.

The company use a mix of drama and thinking exercises to encourage the client to explore offending experiences. In the group process, clients undergo a crash course in acting, leading within the first session to clients performing potentially real situations. From here on in, the client will be concentrating on his own



Violent Offender Group

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Through my crimes I ended up here at Grendon, where I have been given the environment and professional help necessary for me to develop this understanding and a balanced awareness of myself; to grow up and mature; to develop self-worth/value and respect for myself and other people; to become a responsible member of the community in whichever society I choose to live upon my release from prison...

Change is possible when a person who wants to change is given the chance and support needed to change...

Until we construct a more positive and balanced upbringing for our children, our societies will continue to bear the scar of violence; and the most ironic part of it is the fact that we all hold a piece of the jigsaw, we are all as guilty as the next man...

Gary. Grendon prison. C Wing. Life Sentence. GBH x 2 with intent



L to R Alun Mountford + 2 Offenders.

Pete Corbett

experiences of offending, and the thinking processes that occur leading up to the offence, during the offence and immediately afterwards.

To achieve this however, the client must become at ease with the process he is engaged in. A typical session would begin with a series of warm-up exercises. These exercises are designed to energise the client in a fast and physical way. Gradually the group moves into a series of trust exercises, which can be repeated throughout the course to build the clients' confidence and provide a clear way of assessing progress for staff.

As the group develops more detailed exercises are used to underline the ways in which thoughts and feelings work together. These exercises explore status, power and powerlessness, fear and anger. Such an exercise may consist of a

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client being led around the room blindfolded. The questions the client would be asked might be "How does it feel to have to trust someone else?", "What thoughts do you use to deal with the situation?", "How do the thoughts you have make you feel?". From the client's responses, a picture is slowly built to help the individual identify his own thinking process.

By physicalising experiences as opposed to just talking about them, the client cannot avoid so easily the effects of his actions. Drama places the client as close as possible to the real event, and as a result, he now has access to all the memories associated with that experience. It is now a question of the staff member successfully accessing those thoughts and feelings, and then reflecting them back to the client in such a way as to enable him to re-appraise his actions.

In addition to the use of theatre, the client must complete a series of 'Think-

ing Reports'. This is a written exercise, which can be dictated if necessary, where the client puts down on paper the thoughts and feelings surrounding a particular offence.

By having thoughts and feelings on paper it is now possible to underline any patterns that may occur around the client's experience of anger. The more he can identify his destructive thought processes, the more he can learn to identify possible points of intervention, which could provide alternative ways of dealing with situations.

Violent offenders experience real difficulties in dealing with many problems in their lives. Their conditioning has been such that for much of the time, violence and aggression have been the



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only tools that they feel able to use when they perceive a threat. Some of those threats may well be real, but to successfully avoid such problems the client must learn to take control of his or her life in a positive and pro-social way. By using drama as a means of exploring both the offence and alternative ways of solving problems, the client has the opportunity to quite literally 'rehearse for life.'

Geese have therefore over the years developed theatre techniques and theatrical metaphors to further enhance the client's experience, and to increase the repertoire of ideas and images with which they can identify their own behaviour and his potential to solve problems. Mask, improvisation skills, character building, and other theatrical images are all part of the process, and the client quickly becomes comfortable with them all.

However, no technique can be seen as a 'cure-all'. Geese's work is only as effective as the client and the staff make it. At the end of the day, the means for change lies in the hands of the client alone. All one can hope to do is to encourage the client to acknowledge that real power in the world is found not in hurting people, but in learning how to solve their problems respectfully and effectively. That's the real power.

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