

‘Rehearsing the Unrehearsed’

Reflections on the concept of presence in therapy and performance training

1. Introduction

‘The art of letting things happen, action through non-action, letting go of oneself as taught by Meister Eckhart, became for me the key that opens the door to the way. We must be able to let things happen in the psyche.’

(Jung, 1981, par.20)

Presence is curiously manifest through the ways in which an individual inhabits and alters the space around them, arguably less a result of action and more a quality of being. As a metaphysical phenomenon, it carries no distinct definition, and poses paradoxical questions of being in the world. Presence brings into play the ineffable; the question of *being* over *doing* and in a therapeutic context implicates the therapist’s personality in their professional work. It speaks to an intangible dynamic and spatial field which can be an indicator of a psychological state and internal world. The question of therapeutic presence has gathered momentum as a discourse in psychological and health disciplines, including psychotherapy, nursing and the arts therapies (Robbins, 1998; McDonough-Means; 2004; Geller and Greenberg, 2012). In the humanist traditions of psychotherapy, presence emerged as a central concern, and in Carl Roger’s later writing, he alludes to ‘presence’ as the fourth core process (Baldwin, 2000). The therapist’s main aim is to develop an awareness of the full range of experiences that exist in the present moment, with an overarching compassion and acceptance (Marlatt and Kristeller, 1999). Attention to therapeutic presence in this way moves therapy away from an expert model, employing a phenomenological stance which seeks to bring about new perspectives and calls into question the paradoxical notion of an acceptance both of ‘what is’ – and about the need for change (Johanson & Kurtz, 1991). The question of presence in acting and performance has also been a central concern to practitioners and academics, occupying a place which is at the same time contentious and universally valid (Power, 2008). The states of mind and the qualities of therapeutic presence referred to in psychotherapy are often to be found in tropes of actor training, as for example with Grotowski’s ‘*via negativa*’ (Grotowski, 1975), Chekhov’s psychological gestures (Checkov, 2005) and Chaikin’s (1990) reflections which refer specifically to the work of Brecht and Beckett. Such articulations are of interest to therapy, opening up questions of the performative nature of therapeutic practice. Many terms are resident in both theatre and psychotherapy (as for example the concepts of persona; authenticity and play), but the interplay of such ideas may serve to extend the parameters of

specific disciplines and seek out shared territory which may enhance both. Dramatherapy and dance movement psychotherapy are disciplines which have the opportunity to bring these conceptions into focus and generate theoretical, epistemological and methodological questions. For example, Robbins (1998) has focused on the concept of therapeutic presence with specific reference to the arts therapies, and draws from a developmental model including the work of Alan Schore (1994). He discusses how the languages and practices of the arts can add dimensions to the therapeutic relationship and help bring about both psychological and neurological change. Referring to the primary processes of early child development, he suggests that the arts can provide natural modes of expression and communication which are reparative. The therapist's capacity to shift between these modes of expression and remain receptive to the client is at the heart of what he describes as therapeutic presence (Robbins, 1998:19). In the dramatherapy approach 'developmental transformations', David Read-Johnson conceives of presence predominantly in relation to the body and introduces different methods to engage the client in a playful and spontaneous process in which both therapist and client play. Drawing on actor training practices, and specifically the work of Grotowski, he presents an approach which aims to generate an intimacy within the therapeutic encounter, afforded by the embodied and playful presence of the therapist in the playspace (Johnson, 1996: 294). Such existing references to presence focus on the therapeutic encounter in dramatherapy – the practice – but do not engage with questions of cultivating presence in therapists in training.

The following paper begins to examine ideas within these overarching questions, with the intention of developing pedagogic thinking in the training of dramatherapists. What is therapeutic presence and what is dramatherapeutic presence? How (if at all) might therapeutic presence be cultivated in dramatherapy training?

2. Three domains of therapeutic presence

This section looks at a particular model of therapeutic presence in psychotherapy which identifies qualities and states in the psychotherapist which can be considered for innate spatial and physical characteristics. The work of Geller and Greenberg (2012) looks specifically at mindfulness approaches to psychotherapy and training, identifying three domains; *preparing the ground*, *the process*, and *the experience* of therapeutic presence. Each of these domains has within it distinct attributes. In *preparing the ground*, the therapist works with the discipline of *clearing a space* both prior to the session and in 'general life'. To 'prepare the ground for presence' is a complex question of the readiness in the therapist to receive and listen as well as having the capacity to bracket personal concerns which may interfere with the therapy (Geller and Greenberg, 2012:54). The authors offer various techniques for this, such as attention to the body, the breath and expressive movement work in the physical

space in which the therapy takes place. Geller and Greenberg go on to suggest meditation, yoga and dance as ongoing disciplines through which students can prepare this ground, methods which they claim have a positive influence on their capacity to be present ‘in the moment’. Within this first domain, there is also consistent emphasis on the ongoing meditation and spiritual practice of the therapist and their discipline of ‘self-development’, a theme which emerges as a central concern in the question of the cultivation of therapeutic presence.

The second domain, the *process* of presence refers to the activities the therapist engages in when being therapeutically present, including qualities of receptivity, inwardly attending and extending. As they suggest; *process* ‘involves a simultaneous awareness of what the client is experiencing, the therapist’s own in-the-moment experience and the relationship between the two’ (Geller and Greenberg 2012: 95). This *process* is described as a dance, containing qualities of ‘deep listening’ and ‘the deep humanness and core of the therapist’ (ibid 2012: 94). In the third domain, the *experience* of presence, qualities of immersion, expansion and grounding refer to the tensions between a depth of encounter and the need for distance – a constant interplay of levels of inner and relational awareness. The capacity in the therapist to immerse themselves in the moment by moment experience of the session, whilst at the same time retaining objectivity is, they suggest, one of the central challenges of therapeutic presence.

This model offers a platform to explore both the various qualities/disciplines within the three domains as well as looking at the core question of the self-development of the student therapist. One of the interesting features of these attributes is that they are all spatial terms and ones which are also used frequently within performance discourses. For example, we can recognize many (if not all) of these terms in the lexicon of training the actor or performer. The quality of expansion for example is central to Chekhov’s psychological gestures; the quality of receptivity is core to many approaches to improvisation and the practice of inwardly attending is a fundamental discipline which can be traced through from Grotowski to Barba. These terms can therefore be fleshed out and examined within a different conceptual frame as qualities which are also cultivated in the performer. In the next section I consider them with specific reference to the ideas of Eugenio Barba and his emphasis on presence resulting from a *pre-expressivity* in the body (Barba, 1995). Running through the discussion is the ever present question of the self-development of the therapist/performer.

3. The play of presence

Many psychophysical approaches to training require the performer to undergo a journey of self-discovery in order to cultivate ‘theatrical presence’. Grotowski (1975) paves the way for this in his approach to acting where the performer engages with both a physical and spiritual discipline, working

towards a *via negativa* where he or she ‘strips away the masks behind which is hidden vulnerability and existential isolation’ (Yarrow: 1997:27). We might think of this ‘stripping away’ in light of ‘clearing a space and ‘preparing the ground for presence’ as outlined above. For Grotowski, performance training goes beyond character or method acting, and moves into the cultivation of a unique quality, where he suggests; ‘an actor’s accomplishment constitutes a transcendence of the half-measures of daily life’ (Grotowski, 1975: 99).

In order to cultivate this presence, Eugenio Barba extends Grotowski’s ideas through the development of intense physical training (*extra daily practice or sats training*) (Barba, 1986). Barba’s conception of presence is essentially body-based, preferring to begin with action rather than conceptions of presence as stillness or located in the mind (Power, 2008). For example, one method asks the performer to develop a physical score of actions which are repeated and which ultimately give rise to obstacles and frustrations. These obstacles are routes to new territory – a ‘transcendence of daily life’ and are concerned with preparing the ground for new forms to develop. We see clear resonances here with the conceptions of presence in psychotherapy as discussed earlier. Further, in this training method, through the repetition of form by way of a movement score, awareness develops of habitual patterns, bringing about a desire in the performer to liberate themselves and generate new forms (receptivity and expansion). As Barba suggests; ‘extra-daily technique is a major source of actor presence during performance, since it establishes a pre-expressive mode in which the actor’s energies are engaged prior to personal expression’ (Barba, 1986: 119-20). Barba’s approach to improvisation is dedicated to working with these obstacles which are a result of repetition, as it is through these that there is the potential to develop work which is transformational and fosters ‘meeting’. As Yarrow suggests; ‘It is the point at which you stop and draw back that is the mark of the physical and psychological border which needs to be extended’ (Yarrow, 1997:29). Such pedagogic objectives for the performer in training are of interest to a therapist who might also wish to foster these qualities of presence in the body. The following recommendation from Yarrow could be seen as an axiom for both performance and therapy training: ‘Meeting, as a training and performance strategy, requires a mixture of openness, vulnerability and spontaneity with a readiness for close and disciplined attention from all participants’ (Yarrow, 1997: 29).

In a sense, Barba’s approach to performer training is a spatial and dynamic interpretation of Geller and Greenberg’s model. By way of developing a physical and vocal score for example and then departing from this into free improvisation, the student touches on and physically explores qualities of immersion, expansion and receptivity, through touching on the ‘border which needs to be extended’. The result of accessing this border and moving it in the body can be a state of readiness and spontaneity which Barba refers to as ‘scenic bios’ (Barba, 1995). In psychological terms, this method addresses the

pre-conscious (or unconscious) aspects of the personality and opens up opportunity to physicalise habitual patterns of behaviour and move beyond them towards a potential state of spontaneity. In this way; ‘Barba wants to probe an even more pre-conscious and pre-formative level, attempting to ‘wipe the performer clean’ of existing configurations of feeling and behaviour (Yarrow, 1997:30). This question of what is lying *in potentia* and the manifestation of unconscious aspects of the personality is clearly a central concern for the training and practice of psychotherapy, as it is through accessing these new forms that old and redundant behaviours can be relinquished and released.

The function of performance training to reconfigure feelings and behaviour can have a bearing on the training of the dramatherapist in that it challenges them to ‘extend their borders’ and brings the body squarely into the cultivation of therapeutic presence. It should be noted that such dynamic and physically expressive methods of performer training do not necessarily appear in the performance itself. These training methods aim to cultivate a range of physical and psychological states in the performer – often experienced by the audience as an ‘alive’ stillness in the performance itself. This interplay between training and the ‘event’ can be reflected on in the context of therapy where the forms and practices enable the therapist to be clear and spontaneous in the present moment with the client. A remarkable example of this interplay between being connected with the Self and a capacity to be clear and uncluttered for each new encounter is the performance piece ‘The Artist is Present’ by Marina Abramovic.

4. The Artist is Present – Marina Abramovic

‘Somebody told me the other day that for most masterpieces people stand in front of it for 30 seconds; Mona Lisa — 30 seconds. People come and sit here all day’.

Arthur Danto, Art Critic. On ‘The Artist is Present’ performance by Marina Abramovich at the museum of Modern art in New York, February to April 2010.

Since the 1970’s, the work of Serbian performance artist Marina Abramovic deals with themes of pain, hurt and fear. Her piece, her ‘great idea’ which became ‘The Artist is Present’ at MOMA in New York from February to May 2010, boldly took on the question of presence, both literally and symbolically. For three months, six days a week, seven hours a day, Abramovic sat (present) in a chair opposite another chair in which any member of the public could sit. In this piece, Abramovic laid herself bare and vulnerable to both the unpredictability of the situation (she did not regulate who sat, or for how long) as well as offering her undivided attention through sustained eye

contact with each person. As the curator of the piece, Klaus Biesenbach suggests, ‘What is so beautiful about the MOMA performance is she is treating every human being she is encountering with the same attention and respect’ (Akers, 2012). This capacity in Abramovich, which enabled her to be present for such a sustained period of time, and give this ‘fresh’ gaze on each person, can be seen in the light of her many years as a performer. It is clear that she has used her art to work on her inner world, finding forceful and sometimes shocking metaphors to examine her sense of being and being seen. The significance of her performance retrospective happening simultaneously with the ‘Artist is Present’ at MOMA is striking as it juxtaposes the years of raw performance which explore her wounds with this almost ascetic and paired down performance of *communitas*. The relationship between wound and performance are sometimes clear and sometimes oblique in her retrospective, but there is always a sense of her work challenging the audience and exploring extreme states and conceptions of human relationship. One particularly striking feature of ‘The Artist is Present’ was the sustained image of her sitting still on a chair at a table, staring ahead and meeting the gaze of the other. In the documentary part of the film, she indicates that for many hours as a child, whilst her parents were out striving hard in their militant lives, she was left alone sitting at the kitchen table — to all intents and purposes abandoned. Such experiences and images, which may be conceived as wounds, can be transformed through art. Maybe Abramovic worked all her life towards this moment when she artistically choreographed the table and chair scenario once more, but this time within an aesthetic and intimate space and one which ultimately was able to salve this wound of her childhood.

Abramovic was also a catalyst for the creation of ‘shared consciousness’ between members of the audience. This sense of *communitas* felt by the audience shows how this performance had the capacity to create a special quality of space, largely as a result of the space Abramovich created in *herself*, which rippled out. As Biesenbach observed;

‘She did create a charismatic space, a little rent in the fabric of the universe, that was wholly her own that she occupied. And she did it in a room filled with many people, and many people felt that charismatic space as a reality. That’s an extraordinary achievement.’

(Biesenbach in Akers, 2012)

This reflects Abramovic’s enduring capacity to retain her focus and presence throughout the three months duration of her retrospective at MOMA. She really did become as she describes ‘a mountain’, one which was able to retain her focus and aliveness to the very different range of people who came and sat

across from her. As Abramovic herself suggests; ‘Performance is all about state of mind. The question is how you can bring the audience into the same state of consciousness here and now’ (Abramovic in Akers, 2012). This ‘same state of consciousness’ is an example of her presence reaching out to each and every person and of her allowing herself in turn to be affected by their unique presence. She reflects on the multitude of feelings she experienced during the piece;

‘There’s so many different reasons why people come to sit in front of me, some of them are angry, some of them are curious, some of them just want to know what happened. Some of them are really open and you feel incredible pain. So many people have so much pain. When they’re sitting in front of me, it’s not about me anymore, as very soon I’m just the mirror of their own self.’

(Abramovic in Akers, 2012)

This pain, these wounds are territory she herself knows. Whilst the intimate moment happened in the atrium at MOMA, the performance of her own artistic journey which ‘extended her borders’ and ‘engaged with her obstacles’ was happening in the other rooms. This offers an artistic conception of therapeutic presence — where qualities of grounding, immersion and receptivity have a hinterland which attends to the wounds of the individual through the art of performance. This conception is particularly apt for reflecting on the training of dramatherapists, as it offers an example of how performance and drama can be agents for the transformation of wounds, which in turn might lead to a different quality of presence. Indeed, investigation and performance of the wound may be a slow catalyst for the cultivation of the capacity, receptivity, play and spontaneity in the therapist.

5. Dramatherapy training

In the first section of this essay, I looked at a model of therapeutic presence which contains characteristics of *clearing a space; receptivity; inwardly attending; extending; grounding; expansion; immersion*. It is clear that more therapy training programmes are aiming to foster these qualities in student therapists through various methods, including meditation practice, journaling and yoga (McCollum & Gehart, 2010). It is also evident that UK dramatherapy training courses cultivate these qualities in different ways, although the mention of therapeutic presence as a ‘learning outcome’ or ‘standard of proficiency’ is less explicit in programme specifications or the benchmark standards laid out by the HCPC (Health and Care Professions Council). In general, it is far easier for therapy trainings to set about teaching sets of skills and techniques which are tried and tested (and transferable), than to tackle the indefinite and complex

notion of therapeutic presence and the ways in which drama and movement practices can facilitate an authentic and intimate encounter between therapist and client.

Such reflections may support thinking about the development of a pedagogic framework of therapeutic presence and how ideas from performance studies (such as *pre-expressivity*) can offer clear methods to explore it. For example, one of the programme aims may be to foster the capacity for *pre-expressivity* in the body of the student, a capacity to allow the personal and general space to reveal itself as opposed to being led by existing patterns or forms. If frequent and regular attention to pre-expressivity is part of the curriculum, students will have the opportunity to relinquish and move beyond habitual patterns of movement and face the task of allow the space to unfold and for the ‘moment to reveal itself’. This may, over time, support the student in ‘clearing a space’ and developing the capacity for spontaneous improvisation. Over time, such an approach might paradoxically teach students to ‘un-learn’, and explore the physical and embodied qualities of presence through improvised movement work.

Alongside this, an emphasis on experiential studio work which engages students with their own ‘inner story’ through the art forms of drama and movement will support the self-development of the student. Daily sessions offer disciplined and creative avenues for examining, expressing and potentially releasing conceptions of self, ambiguous and emergent roles, and embodied representations of emotional and psychological wounds. Just as we see in Abramovic’s piece, the relationship between the aesthetic and performative Self and the Self that can be present in stillness is a central question. The pedagogic idea is that presence is not something which can only be cultivated only by sitting still and meditating, but is also a ‘by-product’ of an ongoing exploration of the inner story and wounds through performance. We see in Abramovic an artist who is perhaps only able to sustain a still and intimate contact with the other partly *as a result* of the extent of her performance work which has investigated her own story. The extent to which she has examined the visceral, embodied and often raw memories and experiences of her personal journey through performance relates to her capacity to ‘be a mountain’ and maintain the stillness and presence so evident in her piece at MOMA.

To facilitate therapy students to reflect on and generate performativity in relation to their inner stories, their ‘personal equation’ as Jung called it, is to encourage a turn towards the shadow. In dramatherapy training, this inner process is conceivably facilitated by the convergence of several streams. First is an experiential approach to training, adopting a significant amount of exploratory work of the ‘body in space’ and the improvisatory capacities of theatre and drama processes as detailed above. Barba’s ideas of pre-expressivity and the search for obstacles in movement may be a particularly helpful strategy for extending the student’s physical and psychological repertoire and in

developing qualities of spontaneity. Second, the student's experience of individual therapy gives a space for initiation into their own unconscious, where the student is able to look at the movements of their unconscious, which is activated and stirred by the experiential work in the studio. Ultimately, it is the attention paid to the client from the Self in play rather than the ego which offers depth to therapeutic presence and this 'depth' may only be available if the therapist has been initiated into their own unconscious. Otherwise the ego is tricking itself into a false and possibly inflated sense of 'deep listening', or 'deep humanness' and there is no real depth as the unconscious is not acknowledged. In this sense, the recognition of the unconscious and the shadow of the Self play a large part in the cultivation of presence, as the student becomes responsible for tackling their own psychological complexes, which in turn will slowly 'clear a space' in practice.

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