

A Psychodramatic Warm-Up to a Theatrical Rehearsal

by Christian Penny

Christian lives and works in Auckland primarily as a theatre director and teacher. He says, "This has been my passion since leaving school. The mix of psychodrama and theatre stems back to my primary teachers Bridget Brandon and Francis Batton at the Drama Action Centre in Sydney in the early eighties." Christian is in his third year as a trainee at the Auckland Training Center for Psychodrama.

In the past year I have been making some links between my work as a theatre director and my learning as a psychodrama trainee. The challenge for me as a theatre director, is how to best assist the actor to create a performance that is authentic. I have incorporated and drawn on the principles of group work often in creating shows with companies of actors but, this year, I began to experiment more directly with a psychodramatic warm-up as an aid to acting.

I had observed in my psychodrama training group in Auckland how as the protagonist warms-up to their drama, their involvement in the reality of the drama becomes more and more complete. I am often fascinated by the sheer theatrical reality of dramas I have been a part of. Often, I felt like I was in a film or watching a very good play, the reality felt so tangible. The degree of my involvement was linked I realised, in part, to the degree to which the protagonist entered into their own

reality. This is also a key element in a good acting performance – an absence of self-consciousness.

I realised how truly powerful a psychodramatic warm-up could be while participating in a drama in my training group in Auckland. One of our group was enacting a drama from her life. In the drama she was speaking with her daughter in a very loving and appreciative way. Their respect was mutual. As she reversed roles, I noticed the protagonist's eyes

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change colour from brown to blue. It was a remarkable moment and one I wasn't sure I had truly witnessed until talking with a colleague afterwards who had also observed the same thing. It seemed to me that this was potentially a physical indicator of the degree to which she was becoming the other role. I began to wonder about how the intensity of a psychodramatic warm-up could be achieved with actors working with a script.

In May of this year, while directing Arthur Miller's "The Crucible", I had a go at using a psychodramatic warm-up to an acting role. One evening, while rehearsing a scene with an actor, I suggested to her that she think of her own life and the connections between that and the scene she was trying to create. She recounted a time when she had overheard her parents fighting. I invited her to lay out the scene as it had happened. I followed the principal of warm-up, seeking to assist her to create the reality of the time and place as accurately as possible.

She stepped out onto the rehearsal floor and began to set out the scene from her life. In this scene she was in her early teens. She was in her bedroom, lying on her bed, trying to read. Her parents were in another room fighting. There were two other actors present for the rehearsal and they took up the roles of the parents. These roles corresponded almost exactly with the roles they were trying to create in the scene. I warmed her up to the scene and encouraged her to enact it. She was lying on the bed, frightened and stunned by the voices of her parents. As she took up each role to create the enactment, the level of warm-up in the room rose considerably. By the time the conflict

had been enacted fully the scene from her life and the scene in the play were almost direct parallels. At this point I invited her to play the scene from "The Crucible". She knew her lines and could enter into the scene immediately. All three actors began to play the scene from the play. It was a very exciting

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moment for all of us. The actors were liberated by the warm-up. They began to act in a very free way. They all spoke the words from the text freely, with great sensitivity and a lack of inhibition. The scene appeared real. As they worked, they were able to bring to life a whole chunk of the play in an authentic way, free from the need of direction. The warm-up had created the emotional truth the scene required and from that point the text, and their own imaginations, merged to create an authentic picture of the reality of the play.

It was very exciting to watch. I have been trying over a long period

to find ways that will assist actors to play text in a way that is both true to the reality of the play and to the actor themselves. Often an actor will leave themselves behind as they become someone else. This creates a hollow interpretation. For this moment it seemed to draw on the actors own imaginative abilities and powers in a concrete way. They didn't have to pretend to imagine what it would be like for that person, instead they discovered this in action.

I think the role I am developing is the *explorative emotional instigator*, the *director as catalyst*, the *assistant to fuller expression*. I was aware of being a bit clumsy at times in the setting out of the drama because the role of producer is still developing in me. I am still developing confidence in this stage of production. I am learning about standing next to the protagonist and entering into their world, picturing it as it is for them. There is some delicate ground here too. Actors are used to drawing on themselves but in a more private way, and, in order to respect their previous ways of warming-up to a role, I have only intervened in this way at points where the actor had become frustrated with their earlier attempts at the role.

Working as a director to warm-up an actor to such a personal connection to their role is new and very exciting. There is more light to be shed on all of this and I look forward to discussing these developments with others.

Christian recently used the approach outlined in this article when directing the play 'Sons' by Victor Rodger. This play won four awards in the Chapman Tripp Theatre Awards in Wellington. These awards

mark the outstanding work on the Wellington stage for any given year. Two of these awards were for acting: Robbie Magasina for 'Best Male Newcomer', and Dave Fane for 'Best Male Performance of the Year'. All of the actors acknowledged the significant part Christian played in assisting their performances.