

A Place to Meet: Reflections on Group Improvisational Processes on Zoom

WORKING ONLINE IN THE TIME OF COVID

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*All that's solid
Melts into Air
The taken for granted
No longer holy
We are compelled
To face with sober senses
The conditions of this
Paradigmshiftfuckery.*

(Lyrics from a song by Hilde Knottenbelt, April 2020, with significant borrowings from Karl Marx 1848, and a dash of Honest Government Ads)

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It's been a month since I worked face-to-face. The studio is looking decidedly casual. It's become a place to hang out rather than a place to work.

In the first weeks of Covid-19 lockdown, as I considered what my working life might look like in the next while, the word *ersatz* came to me. It's a term borrowed from the German language meaning replacement, substitute, imitation, fake. In WW1 and WW2 *ersatzbrot* (substitute bread) was made with potato starch and sawdust and fed to prisoners who starved of malnourishment. I don't want to create ersatz anything.

*I witness the flurry of activity on facebook
As people work to reinterpret our 3D lives
For the screen*

Around the same time, the title of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's book; *Love in the Time of Cholera* (Marquez, 1988) runs on a loop in my mind. It's linked in a felt sense way to what draws me to the work I do as an improviser, vocalist, psychodrama practitioner and trainer. I know what I

love in the work; aesthetics, responsiveness, immediacy, meetings in the air, the domain of Kairos; moments of opportunity, that linked together create a sense of something both enduring and ephemeral. In this time of Covid-19, when working together is reimagined as staying apart, I remember this love.

*People in choirs catch Covid
Some die
Singing in a room with others is suddenly bad for your health*

The Shift

*Displaced
Dislocated
Dislodged
Rehomed
Relocated
Re-placed*

Poetic Faith: How Far Can We Stretch?

In 1817 Samuel Taylor Coleridge asked readers of his fantastical poems, including “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” to give him “that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.”

He asked people to suspend judgement and allow the mind to be awakened.

In a psychodrama session, we similarly accept the co-existence of two seemingly inconsistent realities. We are in the room and at the same time we are in another time and place as we enact scenes from people’s lives. Supported by a few props, a stage, and a group of people, we draw on poetic faith to support our capacity for embodied imagining.

Switching from in-place to online work, I wonder how far our capacity for poetic faith might stretch without the markers of place and the meanings held in how we organise our bodies in space in relation to others.

*In the context of;
A screen filled with shoulders, necks, chins, eyes, cheeks, mouth, forehead,
hair,
How will we situate the markers of place, the trees, hills, rivers, offices,
streets, and kitchens of our lived experience
In the absence of presence
How might we evoke and sustain a real enough imagining
To enable the awakening of our poetic bodies
In service of coming to know ourselves and others*

In service of developing greater spontaneity

Later in April...

EX NIHILO NIHIL FIT
NOTHING COMES FROM NOTHING

Parmenides, around 475BC

The Sound of Music, 1965

Conserves inevitably figure into new creative acts (Nolte, 2017)

While creating something in the moment is familiar territory for any director of psychodrama, it is always mediated by the psychodramatic form; i.e. the techniques, principles, practices and theory that guide action in the moment. Also part of the form, but so taken for granted pre-Covid that there didn't seem a need to emphasise it, is meeting in a room or space in physical proximity with others.

At the same time as I relinquish, and protest at relinquishing, the familiar of working in place, I'm steeped in a poetic body of practice. My pre-reflective responses and the creative impulses that arise from this practice are interwoven with inhabiting time and place with others.

*There are moments now
Of feeling completely floored
That co-exist with a dread longing for what was
Fluency is missing in action*

I develop a fresh appreciation of Moreno's term *act hunger* through the experience of dis-placed gestures.

*Yes, hand reaches ohhh, ummm, hand drops
What that, errr, yes, drrrrrrr,
Out of place
If we were in the room together, I would have...
Eventually I find my tongue*

We're always creating something out of something.

Acknowledging the Absurd

The notion that this Zoom situation offers creative possibilities for adaptation of group improvisational processes seems absurd in light of the absences.

Listing them seems risky. If so much is missing, will I even dare?

I make a list

1. Simultaneous sounding
2. Stage
3. Shared perception of where we are in the room
4. Spatial knowing
5. The possibility of reaching out a hand
6. Harmony heard by more than one person
7. Having a random hello conversation with one other person
8. Hanging out in a break
9. Arriving through a door
10. Sitting next to a person of your choice
11. Choosing not to sit next to someone
12. Evidence of sociometric choices
13. Who said that? (with 25 faces on the screen)
14. Spatial relating
15. Breath
16. The whole body, moving in a space with other bodies
17. Air
18. Leaving through a door
19. Transitioning out of shared ritual space

The Leap

*Out of a wish and commitment to sustain offerings
A leap is required*

*I move into the fray
Make stuff up
Stuff up
Make Stuff*

Anticipation

*Things I can, things I can't
Discoveries in living it through*

*Implicit knowing
Split second
Non-verbal
Too fast for words*

*Too fast for words
Too fast for words
Explains the feeling of being dumbfounded*

Action Precedes Words

At the end of the first lockdown, I go walking with a friend and colleague. As our conversation turns to the challenges of working online, and the writing I've embarked on regarding online work, she alerts me to the work of Barbara Tversky, and to her book *Mind in Motion; How Action Shapes Thought* (Tversky, 2019). When I later follow this lead, I discover some *simpatico* in thinking between Tversky and J.L. Moreno in relation to the moving body.

In *Mind in Motion*, Tversky (2019), shows that "spatial cognition isn't just a peripheral aspect of thought, but its very foundation, enabling us to draw meaning from our bodies and their actions in the world. Our actions in real space get turned into mental actions on thought, often spouting spontaneously from our bodies as gestures." Tversky (2019) is convinced that movement, not language, is the foundation of thought.

In a similar vein, J.L. Moreno emphasised the significance of the moving body and what he termed physical starters in the warm up process. At a gathering of international psychodramatists in Oxford in 1994, Zerka Moreno, having been asked why Moreno created psychodrama said; "Because he (Moreno) recognised that *movement* precedes language in development, and is the highway to the psyche." (Reekie, 2013). Reekie elaborates on this saying "Movement, and reciprocity in response to movements, are the earliest signals within relationship. Movement articulates and amply expresses states and levels of emotion and well-being."

These provocations, including contemplation of the significance of the body in space/place as a source of knowing, ignite further considerations of how to bring this to life in online psychodramatic work.

With a weekend of training on Zoom on the horizon, this aspect of production becomes the focus of our attention.

In the examples from sessions that follow, I have at times conflated details from a number of sessions to illustrate a particular point and or to preserve the anonymity of group members.

Attending to the Details of Bringing the Body to Life on Zoom

Gone for now, the grand productions, the chorus of voices, instead we find ourselves attending to amplification of a single gesture, the energetic nature of it, the sound, the quality of movement, slowly, slowly opening into text. Baff, baff, baff, legs akimbo, arms and fists karate style, eyes afire.

As she enacts this character, which originates from bringing to life a small plastic ninja, the protagonist has a moment of action insight. There's an atmosphere among the group members that suggests that everyone in the group is absorbing and re-cognising some version of the meaning of what we are witnessing; this thing about gesture, about the body, about awakening life and being spirited.

At times as a director, when producing the body, I'm aware of what Alexander Technique practitioners refer to as the universal habit of *end gaining**. In this case, the end gain might be getting to the point where the person puts *words to their action*. This value on verbalising can lead to a skimming over of what's held in the body and the quality of the voice, before the words arrive. It is in slowing down and attending to these places the mind has not yet claimed, that moments of revelation can occur. They can become access points for amplification of spontaneous expression.

Running on the Tundra

In another session, as we're working with producing enactments in the places and spaces where group members are located; bedrooms, offices, a laundry, living rooms, a parental home, places with an action space of 1.5 square metres and less, as we negotiate the arrival of unexpected visitors in these places including the swishing of a cat's tail, a protagonist warms up to a challenging situation at work. Earlier in the session, she reported having watched the Icelandic movie *Woman at War*. As she brought this to the group, she was invigorated and delighted by the central character, a warrior woman; physically capable, acting on her convictions, courageously and determinedly disrupting the status quo. Now, as the protagonist begins to set out the scene related to her workplace, there's an atmosphere of resignation and same old same old frustration. In the process of warming up to this scene however, the protagonist makes a passing reference to the character in the movie running on the tundra. The *Woman at War* is still present in her psyche, and these two different experiences come together in a spontaneous confluence when the scene on the tundra is immediately produced in and around the office scene in her lounge room. Time and the multiplicity of place collapse and coalesce in our shared imagining...

We are all on the screen, we are all in her lounge room skirting past her situation at work, we are all on the tundra, the voice of the director links her to everyone, she is running barefoot on the tundra, she's on camera, she's off camera, she flits past, she is indomitable, fearless and motivated by her principles, she is energised, we are energised, we occupy a shared spatial imagining, our 5 senses available, our proprioception activated.

At the height of her warm up she enters the scene at work, unified and energetically transformed. When a colleague asks her how she's going she

* 'End gaining is a universal habit' (F M Alexander ~ *The Use of the Self*) (Alexander, 1932). End gaining is the tendency we have to keep our mind and actions focused on an end result whilst losing sight of, and frequently at the expense of, the means-whereby the result is achieved.



says: "I've been running on the tundra". She is light, in charge of herself, humorous.

I still savour this moment as proof of the possibility of embodied experiencing on Zoom, which leads to spontaneous expression of the psyche and a reinvigorated warm up, however momentary, to a difficult situation.

Discovery

Leaders of psychodrama groups in AANZPA and many other parts of the world, have grown up with the tradition of setting up the room in a particular way, with an arc of chairs and an open space. Some of us have subsequently had to adapt to working in other kinds of sets up, including rooms that have large immovable fixtures that take up all the available space. The Zoom group environment presents a very particular set of challenges. Firstly, we have no possibility to influence the way *the space* is organised. Secondly, the way it's organised visually is unnatural and demanding; multiple 2D small squares (or a bit larger if you're lucky enough to have a big screen) are the window / filter through which we make sense of what's being communicated between people.

Creating scenes in people's spaces offers relief from the work our brains have to do in making sense of the data available to us on the screen. Having people being off camera, or partly on camera, right up close to the camera or a long way away from the screen in the course of an enactment, liberates us from the dictates of the Zoom room. It restores traces of what it's like to be in a room with others and uncouples us from the distorted and exhausting effect, of monitoring multiple face-on-faces on a screen.

This seems like a creative opportunity for directors to develop the visual consciousness of a movie director as opposed to a director of drama on a stage. The aesthetics and meaning of placement in relation to the eye of the camera offer a new window on bringing experiences to life in the Zoom medium, both for the audience/group and the protagonist.

Creative Arts Practices as a Bridge to Enactment on Zoom

In 2006, through a connection to someone I'd met in my first year of psychodrama training in 1990, I found myself running some voice sessions in a multi-modal experiential and creative arts therapy programme with a theoretical framework based in phenomenology. In the years that followed, I was able to bring my knowledge of voice and vocal improvisation, story telling, group work and psychodrama to this way of working. I loved witnessing students create multi-modal work which spoke directly to their experience and there were times when I

was able to expand this creative expression through dramatic enactments relating to work they had created.

When we made the switch from room to Zoom in April this year, these experiences informed some of the ways I related to bringing psychodrama to life on Zoom.

Hence, in a two-day online psychodrama workshop titled *Creativity and the Life of the Imagination*,

*In an effort to...
Break the confines of*



*Awaken the sense of touch,
Evoke spatial relationships,
Map experiencing over time,
Invite pre-reflective contemplation,
Evoke non-verbal refinements to emerging expression,
In a manner akin to a protagonist sculpting an auxiliary...*

My co-facilitator and I invite group members to create *installations* in their bedrooms, offices, laundries, lounge rooms

*A gathering and grouping of
Objects, drawings, photos, music, songs, poems, collage*

To stimulate expression of their warm up in concrete form, with the intention to work with the emerging concerns expressed in the installations through the use of relevant psychodramatic techniques.

*A floral arrangement
A pile of books
A prayer: please let this be...
A goanna in the sun
A box of wooden figures
A vision of the future
A poem with photos of rock pools
A gathering of people
A diorama*

Working with these creations, we begin a series of enactments. Through a combination of relating spatially to the placement of objects,

interview for role, and producing interaction between different aspects of the installations, a sense of embodied presence is evoked. The dimensions of time and space are wrested from the screen.

The Places We're In

When the shared ritual space of a group is constructed in an online setting, particular challenges and considerations emerge. People's circumstances can and do vary enormously and being in lockdown adds another layer of complexity, with many group members sharing their homes 24/7 with others. On a number of occasions, family members have made an appearance during a session, offering glimpses of lives we would ordinarily experience on the stage or not at all.

Ritual space is generally marked by separation from everyday living, so this co-existence in chronological time, of the everyday and the group situation can both add to the experience and be unsettling. In one instance, it contributed to a group member leaving the group. In another, a group member experienced her partner's willingness to wear headphones in a separate part of the house as liberating. This alerted me to the way in which her participation was being actively supported in concurrent time. It also highlighted the larger systems at work that were impacting the spirit of participation in the group at that time.

On quite a different note, the multiple places we're physically located in create challenges in producing dramas that can be hard to get your head around. A trainee went some way to addressing this when, in taking up an auxiliary role, she spontaneously created a stage in her own home in a way that replicated that of the protagonist's set up at another location. This initiative helped to bring to life the visual/spatial dimensions of the drama for protagonist, auxiliaries, audience and director alike. Amongst other things, it offered a welcome alternative to the early experiences of conducting enactments in which, because of the dictates of the screen, there was at times a confusing lack of separation between the audience and the stage. It has entered my repertoire as one of a number of ways to stage dramas on Zoom.

Looking beyond the screen

To an acknowledgement of multiple places and stages

Shared ritual space is experienced simultaneously

On the screen, on the stage and in diverse locations

The realities of in-place and out-of-place proximity

Nudge new considerations

Recovering Ground

July 27, 2020

We're half-way through the second lockdown in Melbourne and it's looking like the idea of half way is changing.

Zoom IS NOW THE ONLY PLACE TO MEET UNMASKED IN PUBLIC.

Really!!

There are still moments in the lead up to running groups on Zoom, where it defies my imagination to consider that this medium can offer meaningful, embodied acts of co-creativity. Moments of mourning sit alongside moments of relinquishing and re-entry. At the same time, there's consolation in surrendering to the inevitable and getting on with the work in these reconfigured circumstances.

In the time of Covid, with restricted travel across the globe, getting together online has become an integral part of how countries are run, futures are imagined, ideas are exchanged, and therapy and education are conducted. After all these months, steadiness and flexibility increasingly feature in my experience of working within the parameters of Zoom and I'm reunited with experiences of flow and a re-cognition of myself in the work. Out of the interaction between psychodramatic conserves, the conserves of Zoom and the need to create afresh, there are new possibilities for the ways and places we can meet.

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She brings an enduring interest in the creative process and in working emergently to diverse settings, including vocal improvisation, counselling, and training programs in the creative arts and psychodrama. Living in extended lockdown in 2020 has offered her a new place from which to contemplate the recovery of spontaneous expression as she works online.

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