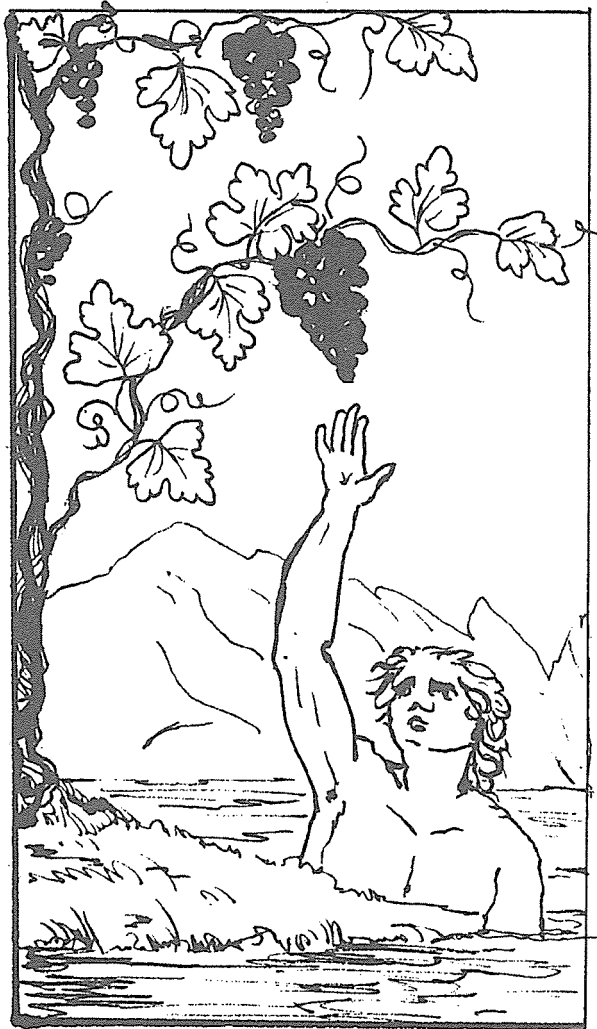


The Tantalus Myth

A Summary

Being half God/half human Zeus' son Tantalus was an important figure in the old world. He enjoyed wining, dining and entertaining his father and many other gods. Though he was a popular host it was also acknowledged that he had a nastiness in him. He committed transgressions which incurred Zeus' anger. The first one was stealing ambrosia and nectar from the gods' table to impress his earthly friends at their next feast. The second one was stealing Zeus' golden

mastiff, then completely denying that he had ever even seen it. The third thing that Tantalus did filled Zeus with fury. He had no food to entertain his guests so he killed and chopped up his own son Pelops. As punishment Tantalus was subjected to eternal torment. He was tied to a vine surrounded by water that was just out of reach – suffering an excruciating thirst. Above his head



hung a luscious bunch of black grapes which would recede just out of his grasp whenever he reached for them. He suffers like this for all time and balanced above his head is a huge rock from his own kingdom threatening to fall on him. This is the end of Tantalus' story but Zeus brought Pelops back to life and he ruled his father's old kingdom of Sipylos.

The Tantalus Myth

by Simon Field

Simon is a teacher in the Special Needs Department of Wellington High School. The students he talks of in this article are loosely referred to as 'slow learners' and are aged between 14 to 19 years. Simon has been working in this area for three and a half years and after joining the Core Curriculum training group in Wellington this year he and Bev Hosking began these experiential drama sessions. They have experimented with a variety of approaches before settling on this one outlined below. They report a real hunger in their students for the work they are doing.

Many of the pupils in the Special Needs Department of Wellington High School have crushingly low levels of self esteem. They are held back in life by academic and social limitations. The students are disadvantaged by having learning problems and many have learned ineffective ways of being with other people.

All of this manifests itself by the students being unseen or obsequious, by them engaging in vicious blaming and by their inability to accept responsibility for their own actions and destiny. These kids are also spirited, imaginative and generous. Many of their concerns are the same as the concerns of all of us. Working with them is always fun, exciting and it demands a fair degree of spontaneity.

Having seen this, Bev Hosking and I thought we would be able to meet some of the students' needs in Drama Classes. Our objectives were to build self esteem, to expand the range of roles that the students can act out of and have experienced,

specifically to develop some playful roles and the roles of the self valuer and self presenter. Fortunately we were able to get funding from the school's Special Needs Grant to run two one hour sessions each week.

We tried a number of different approaches to this work. We were wanting to find a way forward where the students' self consciousness was not so inhibiting and finally felt as though we had made a break through when Bev told the Greek myth of Tantalus. The silence and the awed faces showed us that the students were spellbound by this story. Somehow the story was fantastically distant enough from the young people's own world that they were able to enter into its power without shame, giggles or derision. Paradoxically the themes of heinous crime, fair punishment, authority figures, knowing what is wrong and being tantalised were so familiar that the students related to them quite readily. This framework provided a bridge from their own world and their own

set of roles to a much larger world and a larger set of roles.

After the story had been told each group was to select a part of the myth and to create their own enactment of it. Interestingly the two scenes selected were the crime and the punishment. One group showed with glee the extent of Zeus's son Tantalus's depravity when he chopped up his own child, Pelops, and put him into a cauldron for a feast. The other group showed the enormity of Tantalus's punishment when he was tied for all eternity to a vine, thirsty yet with the water just beyond his reach; the grapes above his head were impossible to grab hold of. As if this wasn't enough he also had a huge rock teetering above him.

The richness of this session came from the students' experience of roles other than that of the punished victim. They have lived for a moment as the all powerful Zeus, other Gods and Goddesses in all their dignity, an ultimately grandiose rebel, a cunning schemer, a provocative tease, vines, water, gracious hosts and as a rock. By the students enacting these parts of the story they have taken it more fully into their own life experience and been expanded by it. They were filled up by something much greater than their own life experience and in a part of themselves they knew this.