

Book Review

The Living Spirit of the Psychodramatic Method

by Max Clayton and Philip Carter

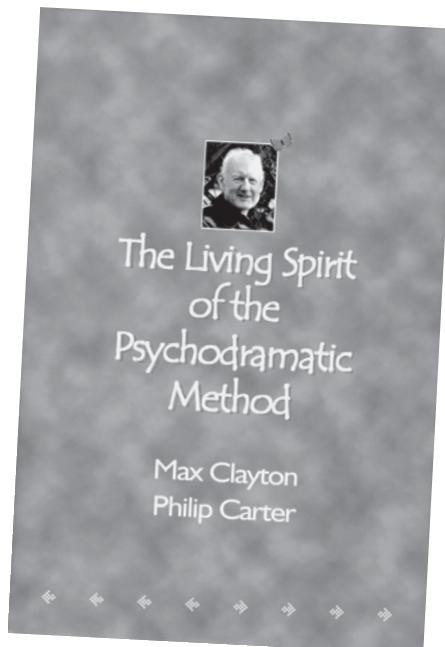
(2004), Resource Books, Auckland, New Zealand

Reviewed by Peter Howie

This book is a rather remarkable collaboration between Max Clayton and Philip Carter and a group of enthusiastic psychodrama trainees and practitioners. Max ran a training workshop, Philip and others videoed this. Later, on reviewing the tapes, Max and Phil chatted about the sessions and discussed various issues, observances and areas of interest. These chats are a large part of the book. These transcripts are presented 'warts and all' and are a bold expression of learning through life. This brings to the fore the humanness of learning as an imperfect art. The structure of the book, with the interweaving of the sessions and the discussions, leads to a real sense of "I can't wait to see what comes next". This is even highlighted by Max at times, "*Anyway, it'll be interesting to see how the next session starts. Will it start with expressiveness? I would predict that, yes it will. We'll see.*" (p77)

What it is Like to Read

It is great to read. It is very like being in a group but from a detached point of view in that it generates a lot of reflections. Perhaps there have been times when I have been in the same detached position as a participant. Is this what makes the book so familiar? Maybe I am too hard on myself - however I believe these reflections are completely congruent with the



purpose of this book. As a reader I could see and feel the goings on in the group and I could get a sense of what was occurring. It was enlivening. A few times I was weeping just like some in the group. At other times I was waiting for the next bit. Sometimes it was like "Duh!!! That's obvious". At other times I was wondering where this was headed. To achieve

this in a book is no mean feat. The photos were a wonderful adjunct and allowed a further sense of the real people involved and the situations in the group.

Like any group learning process this book taps into the ability of the participant, in this case the reader, to make their own assessments of what is happening, of what is being brought forward or ignored or forgotten, of what is being taught overtly or covertly, and what they warm-up to in response. In this case the participant/reader also has the delight of listening in on the reflection of the group leader and trainer. For a book to do this is remarkable in my view.

What I Learned

I learned and at times re-learned a heap of things. It didn't occur to me to capture these things until about half way through, mostly because I was caught up by the unfolding of thoughts and understandings as the sessions were presented. The most exciting learnings this time around were:

- A reminder that psychodrama is not a repeat of shit but "*is an excursion into the surplus reality levels ... there is correction of old functioning. There's a development of new perceptions ... of a different warm-up ... of new relationships and a new identity*" (reflecting on the session p145)
- A reminder that the life of a psychodramatist is not about changing anyone. "*So, there's still the personality. If a person's a bull, you don't want to stop them being a bull. If a person's a lamb, you don't want to stop them being a lamb. But you want it to be refined.*" (during the session p170)
- As a person who has spent considerable time and energy learning to engage with life (as distinct from reflecting on life or reading about it) I am reminded that action has its place and can be as rewarding as reflection. "*He's learning that he can be affected by the things going on around him, that his experience is*

enriched and enlarged through what is happening round him, but he doesn't have to immediately reflect on that experience. In place of that he can act on it. So, I'm constantly asking him to take action immediately, instead of falling into reflection." (reflecting on the session p172)

- A reminder about the use of the word "So..." as a beginning to an enquiry which can easily lead to the protagonist developing an intellectualisation process.
- An articulation that psychodrama is not another method of imposition of one world view over another. "*... it's not a method whereby the producer of the drama imposes their own ideas, or imposes their own solutions, but rather works with the warm-up of the protagonist ... the protagonist's own life force ... values ... are drawn out and enacted on the stage ... no matter how shocking ... they are to be produced. We are to be confronted by the reality of the protagonist's world. We are not here to judge it. We are not to be repelled by it ... We are interested in the protagonist developing a good warm-up ... it's not a matter of them carrying away a new solution into the world. It's a matter of them carrying a new warm-up, a new experience.*" (p231)

There are numerous other learnings which I thought would all fit into this review but they won't. So read the book!

What I Enjoyed

I really enjoyed the feeling of being there in the transcripts of the groups. Because the groups were an actual training session there was adequate teaching contained therein. And then to have Max make his comments on what he noticed and what sense he was making at the time as well as the time of viewing the recordings was a great benefit. I've often wondered what he was considering and reflecting on. As time has gone on I have worked a few things out and still there is a lot left over. This book has allowed me a much greater sense of how Max approaches

a psychodrama; how he approaches people; and how he approaches life. There is a strong sense of unity in the work - like looking at the same thing from different vantage points and from different points of view - and always with a sense of humour and real caring. For example, "So I express myself very strongly because I'm feeling very strongly about the classical psychodrama method. And I really want her to learn it and it doesn't appear to hurt her. I don't think it would be a good thing to have a rave like that too often, but every once in a while, okay. I think a person being trained wants to feel that their trainer is a real living human being with blood flowing through their veins and somebody who has real emotions and can integrate their emotional life with real thinking." (p232)

I really enjoyed the relationship between Phil and Max. How at times there was a wonderful miscommunication and it was left for us to read. At other times I could see the influence flow one way and then the other. "It's good to have this chat because you are stimulating me a lot to remember very difficult times for me. Certainly I've wanted to quit many times, in the middle of directing a drama, or in the middle of running a group, or a series of groups." (p269)

I developed a greater confidence in my own practice from many of the comments Max made about his own process and conclusions. I also saw some of my own doubts, queries and cynicisms expressed in certain questions asked both by Phil and in the group. In a chat about a session they have just watched Phil says to Max, "... and then getting your teaching about acting on experience. And so I had that - I'm acting on experience - and then you come down on me like a ton of bricks for not reflecting and being analytical. I thought" (and haven't we all thought something similar at one time in our training or another? - PH) "how the heck am I going to work out when to do what without reflecting? - So you're saying now, develop a feeling." (p172) For Max's response,

which is a great one, read the book.

I also saw my own training both from Max and others echoed in the writing. Especially when discussing the old idea of 'human choice'. "My observation is, that a warm-up suddenly appears in response to somebody." (p321) Again read on for the further elaboration which is succinct but there is no room for it here.

What I Didn't Like

It was a book that returned the efforts applied to it. So for a superficial read it returned a superficial learning - which after all isn't so bad but it is the worst thing I could come up with. For an academic read it created a thoughtful reflection. For a deep read it returned many personal reflections and many reflections on myself as a psychodrama practitioner and trainer. "So if you're a group leader and you can be affectively involved and also notice different things, that helps you. In my book, its called intelligence, where you combine feeling with your thinking, your analysis, combine the two." (p290)

What Others Could Learn

This is a work suitable for early trainees who have experienced the method, or intermediate and advanced trainees. It is eminently suitable for practitioners with small or large experience. It is suitable for trainers and trainers-in-training. Damn - I guess you get the drift that I think this book is a timely, worthwhile and emancipatory work. Congratulations to Max and Phil and thanks to the crew that allowed themselves to learn in such a massively public manner. Thanks to Mogens for pointing out that the other books that Max has written over the years form great companion works for this one.

