

# DRAMASCOPE

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## Honoring Gert Schattner

by Sherry Reiter, CSW, RDT, RPT

**H**er eyes were sometimes gray, sometimes green, but always intense. She was a petite woman who spoke in a low voice with a distinct Viennese accent. "Is there such a thing as drama therapy?" "What is drama therapy?" In the '60s, '70s, and early '80s, these were the questions posed by the inimitable Gert Schattner. Gert, who died on June 22, 1995, was a pioneer whose questions helped us to explore and define the territory of drama therapy when it was still a wilderness.

In David Johnson's words, "When we look back at the founding of the profession, Gert played an absolutely central role. She was the one who sought out others who had the same vision. She was the one who gave the call to create an association. She was the spark that began it."

In the 1940s, when the words "drama therapy" did not exist, it was Gert who held the deep conviction that drama was therapy. In the 1950s, the National Commission for Mental Hygiene called her work "the first attempt at drama in education and therapy." It was Gert who, with Richard Courtney, edited the first two comprehensive texts in the field. And it was Gert who became the first president of the National Association for Drama Therapy. In the '60s and '70s, for those of us who worked with drama therapeutically, without the sanction of an established association or academic base, Gert was a role model, inspiring us to courageously pursue a profession that did not yet exist.

Elizabeth Gay has written a beautiful biography of Gert's life and the turn of events that shaped her into a drama therapist (NYU Dissertation, 1986). However, the remarkable story of her first experience with mental patients is a secret known to few. In the 1930s, Gert was a successful actress in Vienna whose stage name was Gerta Landers. She was a lead actress under Max Reinhardt and Otto Preminger along with Hedy Lamar, Peter Lorre, and Elizabeth Bergner. In the chaos of World War II, Gert sought refuge in Switzerland, but she only had a temporary visa; once it expired, she would be deported and meet certain death. In order to save her life, she took on the role of a suicidal patient, and was admitted to a mental hospital in Switzerland. This was her first exposure to mental patients. "I lived with them. I ate with them. I was one of them."

Perhaps Gert's special feeling for psychiatric patients stems from this highly unusual experience. Stephen Snow, currently a professor of drama therapy at Concordia University, who once studied with her, comments, "Gert had a deep compassion for people, especially the fragile, the emotionally wounded, the disenfranchised in society. I think that grew out of her witnessing one of the great tragedies of the 20th century. That compassion and caring is what fueled her work in drama therapy and made her want to see the field grow strong and advance."

In a 1993 interview, I asked Gert what had made her into a drama therapist. Wiping away a tear, she said, "It was the war...It was Hitler." She was a displaced actress whose life was set adrift by the Holocaust. A refugee herself, she found herself surrounded by victims of the war, and her skills were called upon to help others. While in Switzerland she married Edward Schattner, a psychiatrist working in the refugee community. In the Swiss tuberculosis sanitarium where her husband treated survivors of the concentration camps, she was asked to organize the leisure time of the young men who were recovering. "Physically ill, they were also disturbed and broken in spirit after the horrors of imprisonment. They were quiet and depressed, polite but lifeless as they paced the hospital corridors. Turning to the craft she knew best, Gert used poems, short stories, and roleplay. She watched these broken young men slowly come back to life. Drama gave them a chance to work together, to cry and laugh together,

and to recreate their lives. Years later, Gert wrote: "Those silent men in Switzerland were my first teachers, and all through the years since, each encounter with a patient has added to my understanding of the wide range of human suffering as well as giving me an opportunity to renew myself."

In 1947, Gert became pregnant and vowed that her child would be born in America. She sought out people of influence who could help her and her husband attain visas, and wrote to President Truman and Eleanor Roosevelt, among others. She was successful, and in her eighth month, they arrived in America; her son, Peter, was born an American citizen.

"Gert was a creative individual, and once she got an idea into her head, she was able to follow through," says her husband, Dr.



Gert Schattner  
Zurich, Switzerland, 1945

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Edward Schattner. She had a will of iron, and this would enable her to accomplish the seemingly impossible. She was able to survive the war, she was able to become an American citizen, she introduced drama therapy to a world that did not acknowledge its existence, and she was a major force in bringing the National Association for Drama Therapy into existence.

In the 1950s, as chair of play production for the Suffolk County Mental Health Association, Gert produced plays involving patients, doctors, nurses, social workers, and people in the community. These playlets served to educate parents and help them deal with problems. Bishop Sullivan, president of the National Council of Catholic Charities, was the first person to call Gert's activities "therapeutic."

At the Lincoln Square Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City, Gert worked with both healthy and handicapped children. The children's desire to perform was a strong incentive to overcome their handicaps. One child consented to having an operation because she wanted to play the lead in the show. Another child, who spoke only Spanish, proved she was worthy of a large role by learning to pronounce the words in her script in perfect English. Wherever Gert worked, drama proved itself over and over again as a valuable therapeutic tool.

In 1963, Gert introduced drama therapy to Bellevue Hospital. At that time, this major New York City hospital recognized only art, music, and dance as therapeutic activities; within a year, drama was included as an integral part of the activity therapies. It was here that many students and volunteers were able to learn drama therapy hands-on. She used warm-ups and closures that were highly structured and non-threatening. For example, a go-around to start a session might be a sentence fill-in: "I am reaching up for \_\_\_\_\_," "I am reaching out for \_\_\_\_\_," "I am getting rid of \_\_\_\_\_," with accompanying movement and gesture. She was able to put the patients at ease and would draw from their thoughts and wishes to create an improvisation or enactment. Her playfulness, her love of make-believe and the twinkle in her green-grey eyes kindled their imagination. For her, they would sing, dance, and act. They could forget their pain and wonder at the fact that they were still able to be creative.

From the time that she came to America, Gert took every course she could that related in any way to drama as a therapeutic tool. While attempting to register for a course at the Turtle Bay Music School, she met the director, Jean Mass. After listening to Gert speak about her experiences, Jean refused to enroll her in the course: "You're not taking this course; you're giving it!" Thus began her teaching career in the field of drama therapy. Years later, Jean Mass proudly said: "Three great ladies taught at Turtle Bay: Marian Chace, dance therapist; Edith Kramer, art therapist; and Gertrud Schattner, drama therapist."

In the years ahead, Gert divided her time between the patients at Bellevue and her students at Turtle Bay, The New School for Social Research, and New York University. Gert loved teaching as much as she did learning. She had a fondness for young people, and that fondness was reciprocated. Her home was always open to visitors, and she took a personal interest in her students. Darby Moore, RDT, currently on the faculty of NYU, studied with Gert in 1986, the last year that she taught: "She was old and frail, but she was amazingly vital and charismatic."

In the mid-'70s, Gert's career reached an exciting period of productivity and challenge. She connected with experts doing drama in therapy throughout the United States, as well as England. Along with Richard Courtney, she edited the first textbooks on drama therapy. *Drama in Therapy, Vol. I: Children and Drama in Therapy* and *Vol. II: Adults* (Drama Book Specialists, 1981) were landmark publications — the first books in this country with a comprehensive view of drama therapy as it was being practiced with many different populations — including the schizophrenic, the disadvantaged, the deaf, the blind, the handicapped, the offender, and the addicted.

Gert realized then that it was not enough to gather all this material into two books. "This was not going to make a profession. What we needed was an association.... Connie Naitove said we must come under the umbrella of psychodrama. I said no. We must make a separate association. By myself I did not know how to do it. I did not even know how to conduct an American meeting. But David Johnson knew how to do it..."

In 1974, Gert met David at a conference where he was presenting his work as a drama therapist. It was the first time she had ever seen anyone use this title. David and Gert both agreed that drama therapy needed its own association and, in 1977, a core group consisting of Gert, David, Ellie Irwin, Raye

Gordon, and Barbara Sandberg met for the first time. This core group expanded to 21 enthusiastic individuals who painstakingly hammered out the bylaws. There were impassioned discussions, heated arguments and, finally, creation out of the chaos. The National Association for Drama Therapy became a reality in 1979, with Gert Schattner as its first president.

Those formative years of the association were turbulent. "I wanted to be president. I had the right to be president, but I did not know how to handle the presidency." Gert served her term, but was not sorry to be free of the parliamentary procedure and politics that she found so puzzling.

Gert was a controversial figure. Strong-willed and outspoken, people tended to either love her or dislike her intensely. She could be tactless with colleagues ("I think you are getting fat!"), but she always tread softly with her patients and intuitively knew how far to go with them. She loved her work passionately, and rather than leave any position voluntarily, she stubbornly held on until frailty and illness left her no choice.

Dr. Nellie McCaslin, professor of theater education at New York University, credits Gert with taking risks and having the courage to break new ground. "Gert was more than a pioneer. She worked instinctively in a field which at the time was largely unexplored. By initiating drama activities with therapeutic goals, she paved the way for the drama therapists who were to follow. Thanks to Gert's efforts, today we have a national professional association and a growing number of trained drama therapists working in a variety of institutions.

Raye Gordon, steering committee member of NADT and founder of the Cell Block Theater, remembers Gert's commitment. "Gert's belief in drama therapy was unshakable, and she did more to further the recognition of it and to bring more young people into the field than anyone I know. She was a gutsy lady, a sharp wit with a wonderful sense of humor. I will miss her."

Gert Schattner was a remarkable individual, whose achievements were extraordinary. We will treasure the collective dream she left behind — The National Association for Drama Therapy.

*Sherry Reiter teaches drama therapy and poetry therapy at Hofstra University. She is past president of NAPT and was on the steering committee of NADT. In 1977, after completing her MA from NYU, she was a drama therapy volunteer at Bellevue Hospital, where she had the good fortune to assist Gert Schattner and watch her work firsthand.*