



## Drama Therapy and Autistic Spectrum Disorder: A Brief Look

Pam Dunne, Ph.D, RDT/BCT and Clare Wren-Russ, MA, MFTI

**This presentation was given at the "On the Edge of Chaos: Finding Flow and Resilience through Creativity and the Arts" Conference at UCLA on April 7, 2013. Accompanying links to video footage of some of the activities described can be found within this text. The power point presentation corresponding to this text is available as a separate download.**

Drama Therapy is the intentional and systematic use of drama/theatre processes to achieve psychological growth and change. The tools are derived from theatre; the goals are rooted in psychotherapy (Power Point slide 1).

Drama therapy, because of the emphasis of the experiential, playful, and spontaneous as well as the use of the role, offers the many advantages to facilitators working with autistic clients.

Drama Therapy is used with Autistic Spectrum Disorder to (Power Point slide 2):

- 1) Increase eye contact
- 2) Develop social skills
- 3) Increase socialization, through projected play
- 4) Increase emotional reciprocity, through drama games
- 5) Increase vocal awareness: intonation, pitch, volume, rate, rhythm
- 6) Increase ability to sustain cognitive focus, reducing inattention and hyperactivity
- 7) Increase emotional awareness/recognition
- 8) Increase body language awareness and decoding skills
- 9) Increase ability to initiate and sustain conversation
- 10) Develop emotional regulation/flexibility, through dramatic play and improvisation
- 11) Increase behavioral awareness, through mirroring, drama games and role play

Three ways of using drama therapy with clients with Autistic Spectrum Disorder are: drama games, the facilitator in role, and improvisational *Commedia dell'Arte* techniques.

Drama games engage the client either in individual or group work. This happens because of the playful, interactive and physical aspect of the game. Here is an example. The facilitator, who turns to the person next to her and claps at the same time as they face each other, introduces *Pass the Applause*. Then the second person turns to the third person and passes the clap in the same way until the clap goes around the whole group twice or three times. While this is a simple game, it requires eye contact, noticing nonverbal cues and social interaction. (Power Point slide 3) *Click on the following link to view video footage of this game involving a client with autism.* <http://www.uclartsandhealing.net/ViewVideo.aspx?ID=42>

Another Game is *Mirroring*. Two partners face each other. One is the mirror, and one is the person. The person begins doing some motions easy movements (e.g., arms up and down) while the other follows at the same time, and usually in slow motion. Then the partners switch roles. Again, this game requires close observation of the other person, noticing and reproducing all the movements (Power Point slide 4). *Click on the following link to view video footage of this game involving a client with autism.*

<http://www.uclartsandhealing.net/ViewVideo.aspx?ID=43>

Another drama game is *The Wind Blew*. Chairs are arranged in a circle (one less than necessary to seat the whole group). The facilitator begins by saying a phrase that many of the group members have in common, such as "The wind came and blew in all those with blue eyes". At that moment, all those with blue eyes must go to the center of the circle and high five the others in the center with the blue eyes. Then, the facilitator shakes the tambourine and everyone must find a chair. Whoever does not find a chair becomes the new leader (and introduces a new phrase, such as "The wind came and blew in all those who are wearing tennis shoes", but there is one additional chair removed each time the game is played. This game requires social interaction and the players need to acknowledge each other by the high five. It also requires observing different physical characteristics of the others, items being worn or common interests, such as "The wind came and blew in all those who like funny movies".

Another use of drama therapy is the role (Power Point slide 5). One use of the role, called "*the facilitator in role*," involves the leader taking a fictionalized role. The "facilitator in role" begins an extended dramatization or ongoing drama based on a broad subject (i.e. space travel, the California Gold Rush, a safari), which goes on for more than one meeting. For example, if the drama were about space travel, the leader might become the captain of the space ship and engage others in their roles. If a leader wanted to focus on social interaction then, in role, this could be introduced.

When I was working on a one-on-one basis with a young teenage autistic boy, he wanted to do a drama about weather stations and become the weather expert. In this role, he drew weather patterns and engaged in solo activities. He wanted me to play his secretary. As his secretary, I completed various tasks, but my main role involved trying to engage him in social interaction. I might say things like, "John, your Mother is on the phone and wants to talk to you. She is close by and wants to take you out to lunch. Here's the phone." Now John can either accept or reject the invitation for social interaction. He may say, "I can't talk now, I'm busy," and not take the call. Then the leader, in role as secretary, accepts this and tries to introduce other forms of social interaction and continue building belief in the extended drama.

Another very important area of drama therapy with autism is the use of *improvisational role playing using Commedia dell'Arte ideas* (Power Point slide 6).

Early research on emotions and facial expression, by Tomkins in 1962, Ekman in 1969, and Izard in 1971, all point to six core emotional states that cross culture and race: happy, sad, angry, afraid, surprise, and disgust. For many individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) social interaction and challenges reading nonverbal social cues are often areas of impairment; therefore, while working with ASD individuals, I simplify the previously mentioned emotional states into four basic emotions: happy, sad, angry and afraid.

In this next video of the *Happy Hand* game, you will see how a clinician utilizes mirroring interventions through theatrical play. The goal is to increase emotional flexibility, emotional recognition and imaginative play in ASD clients. This is achieved by verbally and physically

prompting the client's recognition of core emotional states and verbally reinforcing the client's ability to physicalize the different emotions in different body parts through the use of positive praise during the game. As the play continues, sound is included and eventually scaling variations are placed on the different emotional states, (e.g., what is a "10 happy emotional state" versus a "5 happy emotional state"). *Click on the following link to view video footage of this game involving a client with autism.*

<http://www.uclartsandhealing.net/ViewVideo.aspx?ID=43>

Commedia Masks are also utilized in this clip. Masks are often very freeing for clients and families, allowing them to openly express many hidden emotions through the projected play. Commedia dell'Arte theater is one of the oldest forms of improvisational theater, dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In Commedia each mask represents an archetype from different walks of life (doctor, mother, father, etc.). Improvisational play, using "stock" characters/masks is an effective tool for ASD clients, allowing them to rehearse, explore, and develop effective strategies to regulate their emotions, reduce their fear of moment-to-moment environmental changes and develop a better awareness of body language and social communication.

Further reading and research (Power Point slide 7):

- Marco Iacoboni: UCLA : <http://www.iacoboni.bmap.ucla.edu>
- Paul Ekman: <http://www.ekmaninternational.com>
- Vilayanur S. Ramachandran: Broken Mirrors : A Theory of Autism: Center For Brain Cognition : <http://cbc.ucsd.edu/publications.html>
- Daniel Glaser: <http://www.youramazingbrain.org/brainbody/dancers.htm>

-----

**Pam Dunne, PhD, RDT/BCT**, is a registered drama therapist, board certified, who serves as Director of the Drama Therapy Institute of Los Angeles and Professor Emeritus at California State University, Los Angeles. Her newest book, released in 2010 is *Double Stick Tape: Poetry, Photography, Drama and Narrative with Adolescents in Therapy and Education*. Other recent books include: *The Narrative Therapist and the Arts: Second Edition* and *Narradrama: Integrating Drama, Narrative and the Creative Arts: Second Edition*. Dr. Dunne has served as President of the National Association for Drama Therapy and founding member of the Board of Examiners, and operates a private practice in Westwood, CA. Dr. Dunne leads a number of training programs internationally and has given workshops most recently in Croatia, Prague, Italy, Spain, Greece and Norway. To learn more, visit: <http://www.dramatherapyinstitutela.com/index.htm>. [pamdunnedtila@mac.com](mailto:pamdunnedtila@mac.com)

**Clare Wren-Russ, MA, MFTI**, co-presenter. [hohoshero@aol.com](mailto:hohoshero@aol.com)

*To receive, search for, or post information on topics such as this, visit*  
[www.uclartsandhealing.org](http://www.uclartsandhealing.org)