



## Better than Therapy?

Written by Adam Arnold

“Play rehearsal is better than therapy!” exclaims an adolescent actor working on her present theatrical project. I am tempted to respond to her by explaining that there are in fact powerful therapeutic engines intrinsic to both the preparation and the performance of theatre – that theatre and therapy are not necessarily mutually exclusive. But I keep to myself. She is already using our theatrical process as an opportunity for growth. And she’s got it right. And I don’t want to muck it up.

During my time working as a counselor in a residential treatment center for adolescents with chemical dependency and mental health diagnoses, we created blank slate theatre. A member of the center’s administration asked me to teach a weekly acting class. I said sure.

These weekly acting classes included improvisation games, role-playing situations, and short scenes from plays. The role-playing occasionally contained sticky real life situations. Two adolescents might be asked to sit back-to-back, one playing “an illicit drug,” the other playing her or him self. The drug tries to convince the person to “use” her or him. Sometimes the adolescent would cave. Other times she or he would resist. These acting exercises served as healthy experiments for these adolescents. They provided them with an opportunity to “rehearse” making positive choices in a safe environment before being thrust into the real world where the drugs are not so make-believe.

I encouraged the adolescents to experience the acting class as a new beginning in their day. Once you entered the doors into the class, you left all the junk, the stress, the grudges, and the conflict outside and entered with a clean slate, a blank slate. The adolescents took to this idea, with one remarking, “Blank slate is the only time during the week when we actually all get along.” Yes.

While the spirits of those adolescents living in treatment were beautiful, they were living in long-term treatment for a reason. The grief and pain felt in their hearts

were often displaced onto others, making interpersonal relationships a challenge for them and helping to keep the peace a challenge for us, the staff. Blank slate, according to the actor quoted above, became a respite spot from this inner and external violence in the lives of these adolescents in treatment.

During my time working at the treatment center, blank slate expanded to provide private acting lessons, a playwriting group, and the performing of two plays. blank slate theatre has since become a freestanding, independent theatre for adolescents and not only for those who are seeking or in mental health treatment. blank slate theatre offers theatrical opportunities for dozens of young artists from a variety of backgrounds.

Personal growth, emotional maturity, and finding one's self are some of the hopes we have for the adolescent actors of blank slate theatre. We encourage our young artists to *cooperate* with each other respectfully, *risk* creatively, and *discover* new truths about themselves and the world around them. These three main values provide a therapeutic framework for our theatrical processes at blank slate theatre.

**Cooperate.** It is hoped that a shared commitment toward the goal of the production be developed among the cast, as members of our theatre are given opportunities for artistic responsibilities beyond acting. Cast members design costumes, props, lights, and cast t-shirts. They also write and direct music, stage manage, build and paint sets, and assist with advertising for the show.

The cooperation experienced by our cast members is designed to cultivate a place where adolescents feel a sense of belonging. Too many adolescents spend ungodly amounts of time in front of computer screens, TV screens, phone screens, and IPOD screens. While modern technology has its place, it seems that these adolescents are living in social isolation. Adolescent "screen addictions" may be leading to the sobering truth of a future generation of socially illiterate persons.

Theatre productions – if they are to be done well – cannot be bred in social illiteracy and isolation. In quality theatre productions, all must work together, face-to-face, cooperatively. This is a powerful metaphor for life: Sometimes the richest and most invigorating experiences occur when a small group of people band together with a common goal.

This may be what our aforementioned female actor was referring to when she likened play rehearsal to therapy: finding a place where we feel significant and where we are contributing can sometimes be the best medicine for a host of psychological problems. Supportive theatres can be such places for adolescents.

blank slate theatre views art as a vehicle for social change, and thus chooses theatrical pieces that seek to bring awareness to sticky societal problems. Play

themes and content at blank slate theatre have included issues of violence and hate, sexuality and oppression, the drug trade in America, mental illness in adolescence, and discovering new ways of living. Telling these stories truthfully has value not only for the young artists performing them but also for the audience in attendance.

**Risk.** We encourage our blank slate theatre actors to risk emotionally on stage. A Latino character talks of his experiences of racism and his time living in less than opportune neighborhoods. An adolescent boy recounts his experience finding the near lifeless body of Matthew Shepard, a young man beaten for being gay. During a therapy session, a young female character comes to terms with the abuse experienced from her mother. An adolescent male talks anxiously for five uninterrupted minutes and then puts a bullet through his brain. These are our characters, these are our stories. And rest assured we spend ample time processing these troubling topics together.

When young artists engulf themselves in these disturbing places, they are displaying a great deal of courage. These adolescents are learning about their own shadows, as well as the shadows of others. While the aforementioned snapshots are certainly not happy-go-lucky moments, young artists, when guided with the appropriate boundaries, can experience a sense of exhilaration. As one chemically-dependent client remarked after performing in his first play (telling a story of drug use, repressed sexuality, and marital infidelity), “Acting is the greatest high you could ever experience.”

**Discover.** In addition to rehearsing for our shows, blank slate theatre production experiences place special emphasis on processing the themes within each piece. Cast members have opportunities to engage in conversations with dynamic guest speakers whose life experiences align uniquely with particular blank slate theatre show themes. These guest speakers have included an immigrant from Russia, a music therapist, a dance therapist, an adolescent therapist, a licensed alcohol and drug counselor, a chemically-dependent woman now in recovery, a neuroscientist, an artist, a reproductive health educator, and the fan favorite, a massage therapist. blank slate theatre cast members also attend Twin City theatre performances, meet and learn from professional performers, and tour award-winning theatre spaces. And cast members complete service projects pertaining to the moral issues and themes within the blank slate theatre show they are rehearsing. Both the process and the final product are cherished in blank slate theatre experiences.

It is our hope at blank slate theatre that these captivating programs, coupled with the rehearsal process of truthful theatrical pieces, influence adolescents to move toward new ways of feeling, new ways of thinking, and new ways of living. We believe that when a young artist is allowed and encouraged to step inside of a character, another living being – feeling their feelings and thinking their thoughts

– empathy can develop.

I am uncertain how to accurately assess the impact of blank slate theatre processes. It's not something that I can put in a test tube and measure. The emotional impact of art is most often intangible and mysterious. I do have faith that our adolescents are growing. I believe in the mysterious process of theatre. And this mystery might also be the essence of its power.

All I know for sure about the blank slate theatre experiences of which I am part is the certain healing that occurs within me as I work with these adolescents.

My grey skies turn sunny as I see these young artists laugh and experiment and question. I feel inspired watching our adolescents work together as a cohesive team and boldly expressing themselves in a myriad of fashions. And I feel encouraged knowing that these are the leaders in whose hands our future lies.

Theatre processes very well may be influencing growth in our adolescent actors. In any case, the so-called "healer" is being healed as much as or more than anyone.

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