CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION

BY ANNIE BAKER

DIRECTED BY SUZANNE BEAL

MARCH 4-22, 2015
This is a play about a group of strangers who enroll in a creative dramatics class at the local community center and what happens to them during its six week duration. I was drawn to Circle Mirror Transformation because it so brilliantly captures something of my own experience as both a teacher and student in classes similar to the one Marty teaches. I can remember a drama therapy workshop years ago at the community college in which I was teaching and the poetry workshop I offered through Continuing Education. We gravitate to these courses out of a deeply felt need to release some creative spirit that our quotidian lives cannot accommodate. The contrast between our longing to express what we feel and our limited ability to express it is both comical and painful. I laughed and cried a lot during those classes.

Annie Baker has commented that silence is the theatre’s final taboo. Both actor and audience become uncomfortable when silences go on “too long.” In her author’s note to Circle Mirror Transformation she admonishes potential directors. “There will be a point when it seems like…pauses are slowing the play down…That what…(the actors) need to do is PICK UP THE PACE.” She asks that we directors fight against that instinct, to let the audience become comfortable with the silence. “And that moment – when an entire audience is relaxed and breathless together in a silence, when time slows down and then starts to speed up again – is very magical…” As in life, most of the important stuff in Circle Mirror happens off stage, in between words, below the surface. People come together and split apart. Hearts are opened and broken. I suspect you will see yourself in these characters. The play is very funny, but the laughter is the kind that comes of recognition – you might say, “Oh yes… I know that feeling…”

- Suzanne Beal, Director
About the Playwright

BIOGRAPHY

Annie Baker’s full-length plays include THE FLICK (Playwrights Horizons, winner of the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in Drama, winner of the Susan Smith Blackburn Award and an Obie Award for Excellence in Playwriting, Drama Desk and Lucille Lortel nominations for Best Play), CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION (Playwrights Horizons, Obie Award for Best New American Play, Drama Desk nomination for Best Play), THE ALIENS (Rattlestick Playwrights Theater, Obie Award for Best New American Play), BODY AWARENESS (Atlantic Theater Company, Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle nominations for Best Play/Emerging Playwright), and an adaptation of Anton Chekhov’s UNCLE VANYA, for which she also designed the costumes (Soho Rep, Drama Desk nomination for Best Revival). Her plays have been produced throughout the U.S. at South Coast Rep, the Guthrie, Victory Gardens, Artists Rep, Huntington Theater Company, Seattle Rep, Studio Theatre in DC, Hyde Park Theatre, Kansas City Rep, Marin Theater Company, A Red Orchid, and over 100 other regional theaters. Her work has also been produced in England, Australia, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Venezuela, Mexico, Latvia, Sweden and Russia. She is a Residency Five playwright at the Signature Theater and a member of New Dramatists, MCC’s Playwrights Coalition and EST. A published anthology of her work, THE VERMONT PLAYS, is available from TCG books. Other honors include a New York Drama Critics Circle Award, USA Artists Collins Fellowship, Lilly Award, and a Time Warner Storytelling Fellowship. She has also written movies for Castle Rock/Warner Brothers.

http://ddw.tisch.nyu.edu/object/ddw_bakera.html

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNIE BAKER

VICE Fiction editor Amie Barrodale recently told me to read The Vermont Plays by Annie Baker. I had never heard of Annie Baker, and at first I didn’t read it. Two weeks later, Amie brought up Annie Baker again. Had I read her? she asked. I hadn’t. By then I was wondering why she was so insistent—she had not been this way with any other reading suggestion — so I ordered a copy of The Vermont Plays, which contains four plays, and as soon as I began reading, I understood. I read the book in bed, from cover to cover, and during that time in my life, when I was suffering from grief and depression, this book was one of the bright spots, and it remains so in my memory of that dark period. I have yet to see one of the plays performed at a theater, but I don’t consider that a bad thing, as it gives me something to look forward to. Like she says in this interview, Annie Baker believes that “every single person on this planet is a genius and an idiot” and “any given person you walk by on the street could be brilliant and also deluded and insane.” This comes across in all her work. I should mention that she wrote the brilliant, moving, and award-winning play The Aliens and won the Pulitzer for The Flick. If you haven’t already, read Annie Baker. I insist.
CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION

About the Playwright

VICE: When did you first know you wanted to be a playwright?

Annie Baker: I didn’t know that you could be a professional playwright until I became a professional playwright. When I was a kid I wanted to be a novelist. For some reason I was really into Anne Tyler when I was, like, ten (why?), and I wanted to be Anne Tyler and marry a kindergarten teacher and have three children and live in a stone house. Then I got really into theater in high school. I played Horatio in Hamlet and fell in love with that play, and I also liked tapping down my boobs every night and wearing an oversize peasant shirt and leggings. It occurred to me then that I might want to write plays. Again, I didn’t know you could actually do it for a living. I wrote a play when I was 16 but was too scared to show it to anyone. I also wanted to write and direct movies, and I didn’t get very good grades, so I decided to go to art school. I went to Tisch [at NYU]. I wrote one full-length play while I was there about a psychotic 11-year-old girl, and I really liked writing it and started wanting to write more plays. But I couldn’t afford to see much theater and got really discouraged about my writing in general at Tisch, and so I didn’t start writing more plays until my mid 20s.

I feel drawn to the loser-genius characters that appear in some of your plays. Or, in other words, people with exceptional abilities who under-achieve. KJ in The Aliens is a gifted college dropout with mental illness. Jared in Body Awareness is an autodidact who (arguably) has Asperger’s and works at McDonald’s. Why are you drawn to using people like this as characters?

I have no idea! I haven’t thought about that before. Hm. I do believe that everyone is a genius. Or you could say it the other way: No one is a genius. Every single person on this planet is a genius and an idiot. So maybe those characters are a way of trying to explore all the different ways any given person you walk by on the street could be brilliant and also deluded and insane.

The setting for Circle Mirror Transformation is “a windowless dance studio in the town of Shirley, Vermont. There is a wall of mirrors. There is a big blue yoga ball.” With The Aliens, you have “the desolate back patio of a coffee shop in Vermont. A recycling bin. A trash bin. A PLEASE USE THE FRONT ENTRANCE sign.” These images fascinate me. I am curious: With your writing in general, do you tend to start with an image or a problem/situation? How does it usually begin? Is there a pattern to the way in which it usually begins?

I start with setting. An idea for a kind of space onstage that might be something people haven’t seen before. Often it’s an “unlikely” place: a windowless room in a community center, the rows of a movie theater, the garbage area behind a coffee house. I start thinking about the theatrical possibilities inside that space, and then usually the characters start coming to me after that. Plot is usually the last thing I think about, or, in some cases, the thing I never think about.

...For example, in Circle Mirror Transformation, in which characters are in an acting class and doing an exercise of pretending to be one another, Schultz is pretending to be Theresa and says, near the end of the Theresa monologue, “I don’t want my parents to die.” Then there is “a long pause while he thinks deeply about this.” Then, “Yeah. Okay. That’s it.” I mean, most people don’t want their parents to die. Of course we don’t want the people we love to die. Yet when he says this I feel like I’m really experiencing it, in a way I never have before. My parents are going to die. Of course I already knew this. And yet. His saying it instead of registering as ordinary feels profound. Why? How do you do this? [I have theories about how you do it, but I want to hear yours.]

Wow. Wow. That is such a nice thing to say. No one has ever zeroed in on that moment in Circle Mirror Transformation before. Thank you, thank you. Thank you. Um… er…let’s see. I don’t know how I do anything I do. I’m never sure what in God’s name I’m up to. I just try not to be too profound, and I find that often profundity comes from that.

Regarding, “I just try not to be too profound.” Interesting. Does the profundity seem to want to rear its head when you don’t want it to, then? Is it an urge you’re suspicious of?
No, no! I like when profundity rears its head. I just don’t like chasing after it.

I also recently interviewed the screenwriter Louis Mellis, and he said: “Regarding creating film scripts: The thing I adhere to is something Chekov (I think) said (and I paraphrase): ‘A guy walks into a casino, places 20 grand on black — loses — goes home and shoots himself. This is what we generally see. But a guy walks into a casino, places 20 grand on black — wins — goes home and shoots himself... that’s Drama!’” What do you think about this?

Whoa. Well, Chekhov said a lot of stuff. You could basically find a Chekhov quote to justify any mode of writing. Uh...I don’t know what I think about that. I’m interested in the loser who shoots himself AND the winner who shoots himself. I don’t know. For me it’s all about inner conflict. Ninety-five percent of the conflict in Chekhov plays is inner conflict and not anything actually happening between two people in the real world, and that’s what I love most about him. And I think that’s true for most of us: most of the conflict in our lives is just the different voices in our head screaming at each other. I hate when teachers/producers/actors ask, “WHAT DOES THIS CHARACTER WANT?” That’s like my least favorite question. Any good character wants seven different contradictory things all at the same time.

Have you had some deeply frustrating experience with writing that led to a sort of aha moment that taught you something important about your writing? If so, I’d love to hear about it.

Well, I’m deeply frustrated all the time. All my plays usually follow a two-year-period of deep frustration and not-writing and there’s usually an aha moment that surfaces gurgling from the pit of despair I’ve fallen into and unlocks the play for me after I’ve convinced myself that I will never write a play again.

But I had an aha moment, I guess, in my late 20s, when I stopped thinking about What Kind of Play I Wanted to Write and What Kind of Writer I Wanted to Be. I just gave up. I accepted the fact that I’m a little stupid. That I don’t know exactly what I want to say. That I don’t know what kind of theater I want to make. That I don’t know how to classify it. I stopped thinking strategically. I stopped trying to prove to people that I was smart through my writing. I stopped trying to write stuff that I thought other people would like. And all that followed a long period of bad writing and deep, deep frustration with the fact that my talent couldn’t live up to my taste. I mean, it still doesn’t.

What do you do during the not-writing?

I read a lot. I always convince myself I have to read just ONE MORE BOOK before I can start writing. Then just ONE MORE. This goes on for years. I like spending time with people I love. I guess I spend a lot of time talking to people I love. I like going to movies. I like walking to my local pharmacy and spending 45 minutes picking out a new brand of shampoo and conditioner. I worry a lot. Not about my career. About my relationships with people.

I heard you are also writing for the screen.

I’m writing a movie that I’m attached to direct, and that’s really nice. I’ve written screenplays before for other people to direct, and I wasn’t so good at that. It goes back to the thing about writing something that you hope someone else will like. If I’m writing for someone else, for anyone else’s vision, I just sabotage the whole thing. It’s not a choice. It just happens. I can’t write anything decent if I’m beholden to anyone.

Do you believe in God?

Yep.

Any advice for wannabe playwrights, writers, readers, or for anyone in general?

Be a crazy person. Make weird demands. Write the kind of work that you would want to read and see. (That sounds obvious, but I feel like we all fail to do that most of the time. I definitely do.) Have faith that the weird thing you really want to write that you think no one else will like might turn out to be the thing that everyone likes the most, to their and your surprise.

— By April Ayers Lawson

http://www.vice.com/read/if-youre-going-to-read-plays-read-annie-bakers-plays
About the Playwright

CAPTURING SILENCE: ANNIE BAKER AND THE NEW NATURALISM

A playwright who hates the idea of talking may come as a surprise. (From Shaw to Wilde to Tennessee Williams, the history of theatre is largely the story of the eloquent.) But, tellingly, many of breakout writer Annie Baker’s best reviews focus on her ability to see the ordinary and to render halting, imperfect everyday life in a revelatory light. Adam Feldman of Time Out New York lauds how Baker “depicts major life changes in the most low-key and off-angle ways imaginable. The silences — and there are many — speak louder than most of the words.”

Annie Baker’s characters evolve slowly, and, like all of us, they often wish they had said something less, something else, something better. To create them, the playwright cultivates listening as part of her technique. “I will record myself reading [my writing], and I will listen to it obsessively and rewrite according to how I respond to the recording of myself,” Baker says. “It’s just part of the writing. It’s really humiliating, and I would never play these recordings for anybody. I’m not a good actor.”

The intense focus on the speech of real, ordinary people has led Annie Baker’s critical champions to see her as pushing to new frontiers in naturalism. Baker counts the quintessential realist Anton Chekov as her greatest influence, but one can as easily see the echoes of Chekov’s contemporary and ally Emile Zola, the primary theorist of theatrical naturalism. (Zola famously said, “A play is a slice of life placed on the stage with art.”)

Baker is quick to point out that we all mean something different by the word naturalism. What one person finds “natural,” another person finds “affected,” and vice versa. Yet we learn much about how a playwright views the world from the slice of life they present onstage. For Baker, those lives are often silent ones as she focuses strongly on the space between her lines. A note at the beginning of Circle Mirror Transformation specifies the difference between what she means when she writes a short pause versus a pause, a silence versus a long silence.

Crazy stuff happens during silences at the theater,” Baker believes, melding her observation of the world around her with a sophisticated view of the theatrical experience of an audience. “The audience suddenly becomes aware of itself, and a little weirded out and uncomfortable, and maybe someone coughs and whispers, but if the silence goes on long enough eventually people adjust to it and get kind of comfortable and zen and find their own way back into the reality of the play. And that moment — when an entire audience is relaxed and breathless together in a silence, when time slows down and then starts to speed up again — is very magical to me.”


MAJOR INFLUENCE ON ANNIE BAKER

Anton Chekov

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born on January 29, 1860, in Taganrog, Russia. His father, Pavel, was a grocer with frequent money troubles; his mother, Yevgeniya, shared her love of storytelling with Chekhov and his five siblings.

When Pavel’s business failed in 1875, he took the family to Moscow to look for other work while Chekhov remained in Taganrog until he finished his studies. Chekhov finally joined his family in Moscow in 1879 and enrolled at medical school. With his father still struggling financially, Chekhov supported the family with his freelance writing, producing hundreds of short comic pieces under a pen name for local magazines.
During the mid-1880s, Chekhov practiced as a physician and began to publish serious works of fiction under his own name. His pieces appeared in the newspaper New Times and then as part of collections such as Motley Stories (1886). His story “The Steppe” was an important success, earning its author the Pushkin Prize in 1888. Like most of Chekhov’s early work, it showed the influence of the major Russian realists of the 19th century, such as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

Chekhov also wrote works for the theater during this period. His earliest plays were short farces; however, he soon developed his signature style, which was a unique mix of comedy and tragedy. Plays such as Ivanov (1887) and The Wood Demon (1889) told stories about educated men of the upper classes coping with debt, disease and inevitable disappointment in life.

**Major Works**

Chekhov wrote many of his greatest works from the 1890s through the last few years of his life. In his short stories of that period, including “Ward No. 6” and “The Lady with the Dog,” he revealed a profound understanding of human nature and the ways in which ordinary events can carry deeper meaning.

In his plays of these years, Chekhov concentrated primarily on mood and characters, showing that they could be more important than the plots. Not much seems to happen to his lonely, often desperate characters, but their inner conflicts take on great significance. Their stories are very specific, painting a picture of pre-revolutionary Russian society, yet timeless.

From the late 1890s onward, Chekhov collaborated with Constantin Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theater on productions of his plays, including his masterpieces The Seagull (1895), Uncle Vanya (1897), The Three Sisters (1901) and The Cherry Orchard (1904).

In 1901, Chekhov married Olga Knipper, an actress from the Moscow Art Theatre. However, by this point his health was in decline due to the tuberculosis that had affected him since his youth. While staying at a health resort in Badenweiler, Germany, he died in the early hours of July 15, 1904, at the age of 44.

Chekhov is considered one of the major literary figures of his time. His plays are still staged worldwide, and his overall body of work influenced important writers of an array of genres, including James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams and Henry Miller.

www.biography.com
Circle Mirror Transformation is the story of a group of people who come together in a creative dramatics class in the fictional town of Shirley, Vermont. The play follows their developing relationships during the six weeks duration of the course. Although the play is naturalistic, the title definitely is important to the play’s themes.

The Circle

Circle is a universal symbol with extensive meaning. It represents the notions of totality, wholeness, original perfection, the self, the infinite, eternity, timelessness, all cyclic movement, God (“God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” (Hermes Trismegistus)). As the sun, it is masculine power; as the soul and as encircling waters, it is the feminine maternal principle. “It implies an idea of movement, and symbolizes the cycle of time, the perpetual motion of everything that moves, the planets’ journey around the sun (the circle of the zodiac), the great rhythm of the universe. The circle is also zero in our system of numbering, and symbolizes potential, or the embryo. It has a magical value as a protective agent...and indicates the end of the process of individuation, of striving towards a psychic wholeness and self-realization” (Julien, 71).

http://www.umich.edu/~umfandsf/symbolismproject/symbolism.html/C/circle.html

ZEN CIRCLE

In Zen Buddhism there are many different types of symbolism that arise; one of these is the Zen Circle, otherwise known as the Enso. It is used in calligraphy quite often and has a rich history even though it is not a character.

What it Means

The Enso is most commonly associated with Zen Buddhism. It is a symbol of absolute enlightenment, elegance, strength, the universe and the void. Some also believe it to symbolize the Japanese aesthetic itself. It is considered an expression of minimalism.

Painting the Enso

If one is painting, then the Enso represents a moment when the mind lets the body create whatever it wants. It is usually done on silk or rice paper and is done in one stroke. It is supposed to show how artistic the spirit is at that specific time. Many Buddhists believe you can judge someone’s artistic ability by how well they draw an Enso, and that only a person who is spiritually and mentally complete can draw a true Enso.

http://www.zencircle.com/what-is-the-zen-circle
The Mirror

The idea of a reflected image of oneself is an ancient literary symbol. In Greek mythology Narcissus fell in love with his image in a pool of water. One of the most famous references of a mirror is in Hamlet’s speech to the players.

**HAMLET:**

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

*Hamlet Act 3, scene 2, 17–24*

**OTHER FAMOUS LITERARY MIRRORS**

*The Metamorphoses*, by Ovid. Roman poet Ovid wrote this Latin narrative poem telling the history of the world from its creation to the deification of Julius Caesar. It has 15 Books, and Book 3 narrates the story of Narcissus. Narcissus is an exceptionally handsome youth who fell in love with his own reflection in the Styx River. He died looking at his reflection and a small flower grew in the spot where he died.

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, by the Brothers Grimm. This is a classic fairy tale known by children. The Wicked Queen asks a magical mirror these famous lines: “Mirror, mirror on the wall! Who’s the fairest of them all?” The mirror will answer, “You are,” until one day the mirror tells her that her step-daughter Snow White surpasses all of the Queen’s beauty.

*Through the Looking-Glass*, by Lewis Carrol. A sequel to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the setting of this children’s fiction is a mirror image of Wonderland. Many mirror themes are used in this work of literature such as inversion of Alice’s room, opposites, time running backwards, and so on.

*Ricnrd II*, by William Shakespeare. This 1595 play tells the tale of a weak, medieval king who, after a long speech, got a mirror and smashed it to the ground uttering the words, “For there it is, crack’d in a hundred shivers.” Superstitious people fear that breaking a mirror brings bad luck, but Shakespeare was not concerned about it. King Richard II already had his bad luck.

*Mirror*, by Sylvia Plath. This poem describes the mirror’s existence and its owner. The mirror is unjudgmental, reflecting only what is in front of it.

*Dracula*, by Bram Stroker. It is an 1897 horror novel which tells the story of the vampire called Count Dracula. Vampires have no reflection on mirrors since they have no souls and mirrors reflect the souls of the people in front of it. A mirror shows a character in the story that he is in trouble when he could see a man close to him but the mirror shows nothing.

http://mirrorlot.com/blog/famous-mirrors-literature
Transformation

Many contemporary theatre artists see in the theatrical experience the power to change perceptions, to open dialogue, to transform lives.

From The Seven Reasons Theatre Makes Our Life Better “...Finally, the seventh way that theatre matters — and this one applies to some kinds of theatre more than others — is that it influences the way we think and feel about our own lives and encourages us to take a hard look at ourselves, our values, and our behavior. The most vivid example of this I’ve ever experienced was during a post-show discussion at Woolly Mammoth when a woman said that one of our plays made her and her husband decide that they had a serious problem in their marriage and needed to go for counseling; and she was pleased to report that they were still together and much happier as a result. Now, I’ll admit, I don’t hear things like this every day. But speaking more generally isn’t this one of the things we go to the theatre for, to measure our own lives against the lives we see depicted on the stage, to imagine what it would be like if we had those lives instead? And isn’t it a very short step from there to saying, gee, maybe there’s something I should change about my own life? And it may have nothing to do with the message that the playwright wanted to deliver! Maybe the play is about a fierce battle over a family dinner that breaks the family apart over irreconcilable political divisions -but maybe you watch the play and say, gosh, wouldn’t it be nice to at least have a family dinner once in a while, and so you decide to plan one for next month.”

Howard Shalwitz, Artistic Director, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company

http://theatrewashington.org/content/7-reasons-why-theatre-makes-our-lives-better

Transformational theater has as its goal the metamorphosis of the human soul, the reintegration of that part of us which is separated from the Divine. In his great play Faust, Goethe alludes to the mystery of metamorphosis as having to do with Divine Love and the Eternal Feminine — the latter considered as an active Power of Celestial Redemption. Moreover, the ancient mystery schools chose mystery drama as a path of initiation for those who earnestly strove for higher knowledge and divine redemption.

The theater was and may again become a place of moral inspiration, a sacred temple, a source for personal transformation where the Power of Celestial Redemption transforms souls. Through transformational theater one may experience a flash of clairvoyance, an awakening of conscience, an arising of an innate sense of truth and justice. Engaged in a drama of spiritual awakening, the actor/actress may become a priest/priestess, a vessel for sacred magic through the power of the Word, and may penetrate through the veil of illusion to perceive the archetype of the human being in metamorphosis, thus experiencing the cosmic drama of humanity in evolution. The Sacred Drama of Eleusis in 1997, Arthur Maximilian Miller’s Parsifal in 1997.

http://sophiafoundation.org/transformational-theater
Creative Dramatics

Creative drama is an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-oriented form of drama where participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact and reflect on experiences real and imagined. Drama specialist, Brian Way states in Development Through Drama, “Theatre is largely concerned with communication between actors and an audience; Drama is largely concerned with experience by the participants.”

http://www.youthstages.com/CreativeDrama/WhatIsCDrama.asp

The class in creative dramatics that Marty teaches in the play is a blend of three different forms: theatre games played by professional actors to develop characters and hone their craft; avocational courses offered at community centers and community colleges for a public interested in exploring the arts; and drama therapy.

COMMUNITY ENRICHMENT COURSES

Life and Leisure Courses at HCC.

“Circle Mirror Transformation” is set in a dance studio at a community center, but the kind of class that the play focuses on is similar to those offered by community colleges across the country as part of their personal enrichment programs. Howard Community College offers hundreds of non-credit Life and Leisure courses each year that allow Howard County residents to pursue avocational interests and express their innate creativity. Course titles include a wide range of experiences: Connect with Your Angels, Interpreting Your Dreams, Learn to Play Canasta, Beer Appreciation, Watercolor, Folk Singing in Harmony, Kokopelli’s Dance: An Intermediate Class for Students of Native American Flute are a few examples. There are special courses designed for young people as well as senior citizens, but most courses are open to anyone over the age of 16. According to HCC Continuing Education staff, Rosemary Muir and Sara Baum, most students are middle-aged adults between the ages of 40-60, like the characters in Annie Baker’s play, and they are drawn to these courses for all sorts of reasons. Some are seriously pursuing a new skill. Others are reacquainting themselves with an interest after a hiatus. Perhaps they played the guitar in high school but have neglected it because of the press of daily life. Perhaps enrolling in a non-credit course is an opportunity to socialize, to meet people and develop new friends after a divorce or death of a loved one. But most people are seeking a creative outlet, a safe place to express themselves. If you have ever taken one of these courses, or been tempted to, the characters in this play are just like you.

DRAMA THERAPY

Drama therapy is the intentional use of drama and/or theater processes to achieve therapeutic goals.

Drama therapy is active and experiential. This approach can provide the context for participants to tell their stories, set goals and solve problems, express feelings, or achieve catharsis. Through drama, the depth and breadth of inner experience can be actively explored and interpersonal relationship skills can be enhanced. Participants can expand their repertoire of dramatic roles to find that their own life roles have been strengthened.

“Under the guise of play and pretend, we can — for once — act in new ways. The bit of distance from real life afforded by drama enables us to gain perspective on our real-life roles and patterns and actions, and to experiment actively with
Creative Dramatics

alternatives.” Renee Emunah, PhD, RDT/BCT, Director, Drama Therapy Program, California Institute of Integral Studies.

[Drama therapy] values the possibilities of the unadorned encounter between a therapist and a client in the play space. Here, the world of imagination with all its contradictions and mysteries can be revealed through the embodied play of two free consciousneses.” David Read Johnson, PhD, RDT/BCT, Director, The Institutes for the Arts in Psychotherapy

http://www.nadta.org/what-is-drama-therapy.html

Drama Therapy Presentation https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbTjt9Oj2NY

THEATRE GAMES

Viola Spolin

Theater educator, director, and actress recognized internationally for her “Theater Games” system of actor training, was raised in a tradition of family theater amusements, operas, and charades. Viola Spolin trained initially (1924-26) to be a settlement worker, studying at Neva Boyd’s Group Work School in Chicago. Boyd’s innovative teaching in the areas of group leadership, recreation and social group work strongly influenced Spolin, as did the use of traditional game structures to affect social behavior in inner-city and immigrant children.

While serving as drama supervisor for the Chicago branch of the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Recreational Project (1939-1941), Spolin perceived a need for an easily grasped system of theater training that could cross the cultural and ethnic barriers within the WPA Project. Building upon the experience of Boyd’s work, she responded by developing new games that focused upon individual creativity, adapting and focusing the concept of play to unlock the individual’s capacity for creative self-expression. These techniques were later to be formalized under the rubric “Theater Games.” “The games emerged out of necessity,” she has said. “I didn’t sit at home and dream them up. When I had a problem [directing], I made up a game. When another problem came up, I just made up a new game.”

(Interview, Los Angeles Times, May 26, 1974)

In 1946 Spolin founded the Young Actors Company in Hollywood. Spolin’s Theater Games are simple, operational structures that transform complicated theater conventions and techniques into game forms. Each game is built upon a specific focus or technical problem and is an exercise that militates against the artifice of self-conscious acting.

http://www.spolin.com/?page_id=212

Viola with her Young Actors (note: Alan Arkin is 3rd from the left and Alan Alda 2nd from the right, looking over her shoulder)
“Transformation! In the moment of playing, a path to body, mind, and intuition is opened. A cleansing, a dissolving of past attitudes (approval/disapproval, excuses, reasons, “I can’t,” “I won’t,” “I should have,” roles, soap opera) takes place, which allows a space for the real communication and the person/the hidden self to emerge. In that dissolve there is no returning to past limitations (roles). The butterfly does not become the caterpillar again. That past moment (life) is exhausted. Transformation!” — Viola Spolin with Mary Ann Brandt, Theatre Games

Every acting teacher has a stockpile of exercises — role-playing scenarios, simple games, basic improvisations — to pull out in a pinch during rehearsal or in class. The rules and restrictions of the game free the players to be someone else for an instant, or even to be a more authentic version of themselves. Games are passed from teacher to student, and often no two teachers play the same game with the same rules.

In Circle Mirror Transformation, playwright Annie Baker has carefully scripted the dialogue for traditional acting and creative drama games. To help the actors prepare for their roles, however, Baker encourages them to play the games for real in rehearsal. Here are the original rules of a few of the games seen onstage:

• **Greetings, as described by Viola Spolin:**
  Players walk around, moving through the space substance. [The instructor should coach the players as follows:] “Allow the space to flow through you and you to flow through the space. Allow the space to flow through you and your fellow player. Touch a fellow player and allow fellow player to touch you. See a fellow player. Allow the fellow player to see you.”

• **Line Repetition, as described by Renee Emuna:**
  The method involves breaking the group into pairs. Each pair engages in a conversation using only two lines. The most commonly used lines are “I want it” and “You can’t have it!” The lines can be said in numerous ways, according to a wide array of emotional attitudes and strategies and with a range of intonations and voices (from whispering to screaming), but participants are instructed to use only these words....The method is an ideal warm-up to theatrical improvisation because it immediately alleviates anxieties about acting and improvising.

• **Word-at-a-Time, as described by Keith Johnstone:**
  The players construct a story by adding a word each. The sentences have to be grammatical and they have to make sense. [Other forms of this game have players] add a paragraph each, but I wanted to prevent everyone from thinking beyond the next word. I asked two volunteers to sit beside me. Then I said, “Let’s invent a story by telling a word each.” Sally / was / going / mad / because / her / father / wanted / to / put / his / horse / into / her / stable. Some of these stories fizzle out after one sentence, but some may complete themselves.

• **Gibberish with a Past Incident, as described by Viola Spolin:**
  Two players, preferably sitting at a table. Using gibberish, A tells B of a past incident, such as a fight or a trip to the dentist. B then tells A something that happened, also using gibberish. To avoid preliminary discussion the two players should be picked at random just prior to going on.

• **Circle Mirror Transformation, as described by Elizabeth Swados**
  (Her version is called “Sound and Movement”): The aim is to make movement and sound one intention. Going around the circle, each student in turn introduces a repeated movement for a part of the body. The student should invent a vocal sound that goes with or is inspired by the movement. Use abstract sound, keeping it simple, so that the group can repeat it back.

— Compiled by Charles Haugland and Cheyenne Postell
The Actors

(James) Tom Byrn

Theater games have almost always been hugely positive and constructive experiences for me whether during my early life as an actor/student, later in the career (especially in multi-generational casts), or as a teacher of teens and adults with little or no theater experience. I say constructive purposely; the benefits I’ve encountered have been of a “building” nature: building relationships, skills, avenues of expression, etc. I’ve played and taught the counting game hundreds of times; Annie Baker has captured what I experienced precisely. Group story building exercises have been favorites also. Exploring processes, one’s own and any given group’s, allows for minimizing the emphasis on product and results. The only result is to explore. Games have been, for me, an invitation to play. Other favorites include games, sometimes silent, that explore space and body relationships in space (and negative space).

(Lauren) Natalie Collins

Theatre games! They’re a great opportunity to let loose and get to know your fellow actors. I’m naturally fairly shy at first, so starting out a class with a few games really helps me open up. Sometimes some of the games can make you feel sort of silly, but I think you just have to embrace it and enjoy letting your guard down for awhile. Theatre games are an excellent way to prevent taking yourself too seriously.

(Theresa) Beth Hylton

I was first introduced to theatre games when I was sixteen, at a month-long summer camp at the North Carolina School of the Arts. I am from a small town in Southern Virginia and this group of teens seemed the most erudite, sophisticated people I could imagine. The Russian movement teacher and the clowning guy who trained in Paris? Forget about it. Completely cowed. So cowed, in fact, that many of the open-ended theatre games, like the ones in Circle Mirror Transformation, proved quite beyond me. I wanted to know what was expected of me, and to what purpose we played these games. Better for me, the Voice and Speech class with the nice Yorkshireman teacher who taught us about our diaphragm, expanding our breath capability, and how to gain vocal control. Science and results. Thank you, thought the farmer’s daughter: Science and results....Took a good many years to get comfortable with the magic — that comes from releasing expectation and a need for an answer — that is inherent in all good art-making.
The Actors

(Marty) Meg Kelly

I definitely remember doing versions of Circle Mirror Transformation in both undergrad and grad school. I remember the experience as being freeing and fun when done with a group of fellow theatre majors who were willing to try anything. But I have not had as good an experience with my own students — I think because they are not theatre majors and for many of them, an acting class is very much outside of their comfort zone. I use more improvisation games and improvised scenes with my students. Just that little bit of structure seems to help.

(Schultz) Yury Lomakin

I just so happen to be one of those actors who doesn’t favor many theatre games. Wouldn’t go as far as detesting though; I’m more a fan of focused breathing and systematic relaxation of the body. However, I’m well aware and appreciative of the bonding and trust-building those games establish between the cast members.
The Set

The play takes place over six weeks in the summertime in Shirley, Vermont in an empty dance studio with a wall of mirrors. We have chosen to use the empty HVPA Studio Theatre in acknowledgement of the similarity between the community recreation center course offered in the play and those Life and Leisure courses offered by HCC. Rarely will you see a play in which there is literally no set. In our production the space is controlled by the lighting and sound designs.

The Designers

SOUND DESIGN, Wiliam D’Eugenio

Every show has unique challenges. Even a show like Circle Mirror Transformation, that may seem simple at a first glance, can grow to a rather complex level. For this production, the challenge is going to be creating an environment that is believable as completely “real” in the world of the characters. An environment that seamlessly takes the audience from the real-time sounds of their world, having just walked through the doors of the theatre and sat down, and continues into the world of the play, without it feeling like artificial sounds have started enhancing. Though this play isn’t strict “realism”, we are using several elements of realism I think are some of the hardest things to do well in theatre. When you have the ability to use metaphors, or create the “feeling of” a door opening or a clock chiming, there is room for interpretation. My goal is for audience members to not need to consider my interpretation of sounds (such as a door opening), but to accept them for what they are in the world of the play.

Additionally, this project is exciting to me because of the composition work I’ll be doing while attending rehearsals. I can’t wait to collaborate in the rehearsal room with the other team members on the transitional elements that help advance time in the play. Working on underscoring for transitions is a fairly regular charge as a Sound Designer. Getting to do so while in the rehearsal room, and being involved in new discoveries that inform the characters as well as the music is a special treat.

LIGHTING DESIGN, Marianne Meadows

The lighting design, at this point is in process. I have read the play and attended the necessary meetings. What I know is that there will be lights. Some will have color, some will have patterns/gobos. They will turn on and off. Right now I am not paying attention at all to the process. It is too soon. Rehearsals have not yet begun, and I need to remain a blank slate. Lighting is a response art, and my time to participate fully is during/after the design run — after I have seen how the director and the actors use the space, after I have watched the physical use of the physical space. Ask me again about my process during tech week.

COSTUME DESIGN, Gail Beach

This play gives us an intimate view of the characters and how they relate to this specific environment. You must believe they are wearing their own clothes; at the same time the clothes must subtly give the audience information of their potential back story and self-perception. I am working closely with the director and the actors to the clothing choices and will attend rehearsals when possible to see what information I can glean from their process. I will be pulling all of the ideas into a cohesive look for the show and to make sure the transitions between scenes can be accomplished, mixing practical concerns with creative ideas.
The Props

There are only three major props in the play, a yoga ball, a hula hoop, and a dream catcher. It is no coincidence that they are all circular.

YOGA BALL

The physical object known as a “Swiss Ball” was developed in 1963 by Aquilino Cosani, an Italian plastics manufacturer. He perfected a process for molding large puncture-resistant plastic balls. Those balls, then known as “Pezzi balls”, were first used in treatment programs for newborns and infants by Mary Quinton, a British physiotherapist working in Switzerland. Later, Dr. Susanne Klein-Vogelbach, the director at the Physical Therapy School in Basel, Switzerland, integrated the use of ball exercise as physical therapy for neuro-developmental treatment. Based on the concept of “functional kinetics”, Klein-Vogelbach advocated the use of ball techniques to treat adults with orthopedic or medical problems. The term “Swiss Ball” was used when American physical therapists began to use those techniques in North America after witnessing their benefits in Switzerland. From their development as physical therapy in a clinical setting, those exercises are now used in athletic training, as part of a general fitness routine and incorporation in alternative exercises such as yoga and pilates.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exercise_ball

HULA HOOP

A hula hoop is a toy hoop that is twirled around the waist, limbs or neck. The modern hula hoop was invented in 1958 by Arthur K. Melin and Richard Knerr, but children and adults around the world have played with hoops, twirling, rolling and throwing them throughout history. Hula hoops for children generally measure approximately 71 centimeters (28 in) in diameter, and those for adults around 1.02 meters (40 in). Traditional materials for hoops include willow, rattan (a flexible and strong vine), grapevines and stiff grasses. Today, they are usually made of plastic tubing.

Native American Hoop Dance is a form of storytelling dance incorporating anywhere from one to thirty hoops as props. These props are used to create both static and dynamic shapes, which represent various animals, symbols, and storytelling elements. The dance is generally performed by a solo dancer with multiple hoops.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hula_hoop

THE DREAM CATCHER

Dream catchers are arts and crafts of the Native American people. The original web dream catcher of the Ojibwa was intended to teach natural wisdom. Nature is a profound teacher. Dream catchers of twigs, sinew, and feathers have been woven since ancient times by Ojibwa people. They were woven by the grandfathers and grandmothers for newborn children and hung above the cradleboard to give the infants peaceful, beautiful dreams. The night air is filled with dreams. Good dreams are clear and know the way to the dreamer, descending through the feathers. The slightest movement
of the feathers indicated the passage of yet another beautiful dream. Bad dreams, however, are confused and confusing. They cannot find their way through the web and are trapped there until the sun rises and evaporates them like the morning dew.

Originally the Native American dream catcher was woven on twigs of the red willow using thread from the stalk of the stinging nettle. The red willow and twigs from other trees of the willow family, as well as red twig dogwood can be found in many parts of the United States. These twigs are gathered fresh and dried in a circle or pulled into a spiral shape depending upon their intended use. They used natural feathers and semi-precious gemstone, one gemstone to each web because there is only one creator in the web of life.

**History of Dream Catchers**

Long ago when the word was sound, an old Lakota spiritual leader was on a high mountain and had a vision. In his vision, Iktomi, the great trickster and searcher of wisdom, appeared in the form of a spider. Iktomi spoke to him in a sacred language. As he spoke, Iktomi the spider picked up the elder’s willow hoop which had feathers, horsehair, beads and offerings on it, and began to spin a web. He spoke to the elder about the cycles of life, how we begin our lives as infants, move on through childhood and on to adulthood. Finally we go to old age where we must be taken care of as infants, completing the cycle.

But, Iktomi said as he continued to spin his web, in each time of life there are many forces, some good and some bad. If you listen to the good forces, they will steer you in the right direction. But, if you listen to the bad forces, they’ll steer you in the wrong direction and may hurt you. So these forces can help, or can interfere with the harmony of Nature. While the spider spoke, he continued to weave his web.

When Iktomi finished speaking, he gave the elder the web and said, The web is a perfect circle with a hole in the center. Use the web to help your people reach their goals, making good use of their ideas, dreams and visions. If you believe in the great spirit, the web will filter your good ideas and the bad ones will be trapped and will not pass.

The elder passed on his vision onto the people and now many Indian people have a dreamcatcher above their bed to sift their dreams and visions. The good will pass through the center hole to the sleeping person. The evil in their dreams are captured in the web, where they perish in the light of the morning sun. It is said the dreamcatcher holds the destiny of the future.

Theater Etiquette

Attending the theater will be a positive experience for everyone if you observe a few simple courtesies:

- Turn off and put away all electronic devices prior to entering the theater.
- Taking photographs and video recording in the theater is prohibited.
- Do not place your feet on the seat in front of you.
- The actors onstage can see and hear the audience just as well as the audience can see and hear them. Please refrain from talking or moving around during the performance as it can be distracting to the actors, as well as to other audience members.
- Feel free to respond to the action of the play through appropriate laughter and applause. The actors enjoy this type of communication from the audience!
- Have fun! Attending theater should be an enjoyable experience.