

Anna Halprin's Theatre and Therapy Workshop

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Source: *The Drama Review: TDR*, Mar., 1976, Vol. 20, No. 1, Theatre and Therapy (Mar., 1976), pp. 50-54

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1145037>

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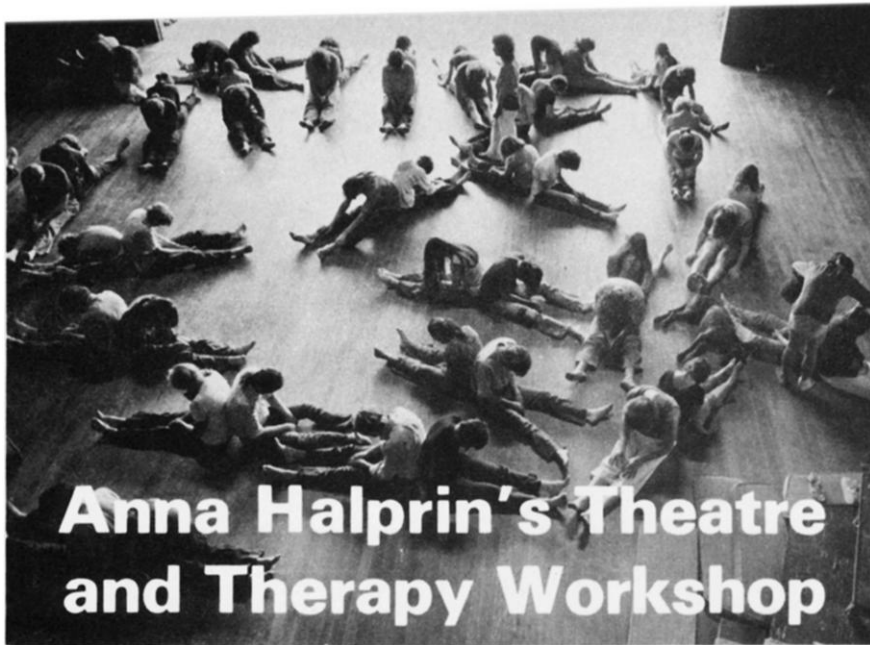
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## By Norma Jean and František Deák

For the last two years the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop has concentrated on the workshop process rather than on public performance. This change of emphasis is closely connected to Anna Halprin's concern with therapy (a means and an end in itself) as the focal point of artistic activity rather than with the esthetic or formal elements of dance or theatre.

In a broad sense, the theatre experience—through empathy, for example—can be considered in terms of therapy. In the same way, therapy, especially group therapy, has “theatrical elements,” such as role-playing, acting-out emotions, self-revealing monologs, etc. But usually theatre and therapy, in their conventional contexts, remain two separate areas with only minimal overlapping.

Anna Halprin bridges the gap between therapy and theatre first by being a performer (a dancer with a long history of innovative approach to dance) and a dance therapist; and secondly by devising workshops in which the function of theatre and therapy are identical. In these workshops, Halprin assumes an *unfinished individual* who is capable of creativity but only in a limited way. In order for this person to reach his/her potential, he/she must undergo “therapy,” understood as a process through which his/her psychological and physical blocks are faced and hopefully overcome. The “making visible” of this process for the other participants constitutes the “theatre” part of the workshop process. The result is personal growth (“each person is his own art”) and the ability to perform a new “dance.” The process is gradual, so that each participant makes visible a series of processes and, in so doing, performs a series of new dances.

In this synthesis of theatre and therapy, the role of the audience has been redefined. Audience members function both as participants and as spectators at different times during the workshop. It can be argued that every workshop or rehearsal in which some members work and some watch is a performance. But there is a difference between a workshop or rehearsal that aims at a performance and a self-contained workshop. First of all, Halprin clearly establishes in the workshop score that at a particular moment a group or an individual will perform for the others, who will then function as audience, and that the roles will be reversed. Secondly, all members of the workshop are united by the common idea of using theatre as a means to undergo certain transformations in their lives; and thirdly, all participants share the same score, which gives each member a special and intimate insight into the performance process that the others experience.

Halprin elaborated on her understanding of the relationship between theatre and therapy:

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Anna Halprin (standing) conducts an exercise during a therapy workshop in California. Photograph by Arne Folkedal.

*I'm not focused on viewing the work at the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop as therapy in the medical sense. However, looking at therapy as a natural process of bringing harmony between mind, body, and feeling makes therapy a useful perspective from which to view our work. In our approach to theatre and dance, art grows directly out of our lives. Whatever emotional, physical, or mental barriers that we carry around with us in our personal lives will be the same barriers that inhibit our full creative expression.*

*It is for this reason that we need to release emotional blocks in order to fully realize our human creative potential; in terms of being able to effectively develop as performers, and creators, as well as to participate with satisfaction in our lives. I look at emotional blocks as damaging to artistic growth as to personal growth. Therapy is often confined to emotional blocks. I work with the notion that emotional blocks are tied into our physical body and mental images. It is the synthesis (holistic aspects) of the ways in which one area relates to the other that is crucial.*

*When a person has reached an impasse we know something in their life and in their art is not working. What is not working is their old dance. The old dance is made up of imprints imbedded in the muscles and nerves that is reflected in behavior patterns manifested in the way that person participates, interrelates, and performs their life and their art. Our mutual task is to penetrate the old imprint and experienced processes that will allow the persons themselves to discover and create their own new dances.*

*The sequence of a process would go like this: I have people clearly looking at their old dance, confronting it and accepting what it is and by dancing it, experiencing that it is not working. Once this has happened, all that vital energy locked up in the old dance is rechanneled as energy and motivation to be used in creating a new one. That moment, when a person finally accepts that the old dance will no longer work, becomes the cathartic instant which releases energy necessary for the new creation. The SFDW has evolved a set of techniques by which anyone can create their own dance, according to their personal needs. This process, the creation of the new dance, is equally important as the breakthrough of the old pattern. They create these dances as a ritual or ceremony and then use that perspective to manifest the new dance throughout their lives. This cyclic approach applies to groups and communities as well as to individuals.*

On December 12, 1975, Halprin held a workshop in New York City from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. It was entitled "Theatre and Therapy" and was open to anyone for a \$25 fee. (Most of the participants were either dancers or therapists.) Upon arriving at the SoHo loft where the workshop was held, participants were registered and then, as a group, went upstairs to the space where the workshop took place.

The first exercise was called "name game." All the participants sat in a circle. One by one each person said his name and then proceeded to name the people who came before him in the circle, so that the last person had to say his own name and then go around the entire circle saying each person's name. At the same time a particular name was said, the participant was told to make eye contact with that person. At one point, Halprin asked that, before saying the names, the participants should utter a sound which expressed their feelings at that particular moment. (Most of the sounds reflected apprehension about being able to fulfill the task of remembering the names.) When the circle was completed, the participants evaluated what had happened during the exercise. They asked themselves the question of how they had fulfilled the score. Most people expressed surprise at how well they remembered the names, because in everyday life they often had difficulty. On the other hand, a few people admitted that they had not really made eye contact because they were concentrating so hard on remembering the names. After this evaluation before

the entire group, each participant turned to the person next to him and shared his particular experience with the "name game."

The next exercise proposed was one involving "touching and noticing." Each member of the group walked around the room making contact with one person at a time. This was done by touching a particular article of clothing or jewelry, a necklace for example, and saying, "I notice your necklace," or touching a ring and saying, "I notice your ring."

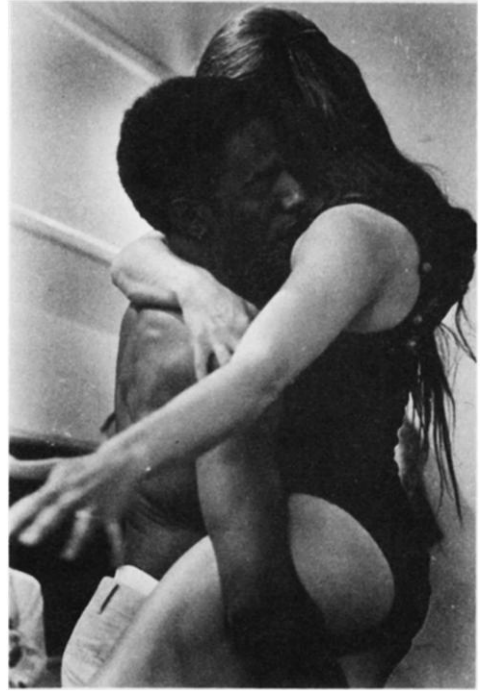
The function of these two exercises was to establish initial contact between the members of the group and with the environment and to concentrate on the "now" by attempting to rid the mind of thoughts related to the world outside the workshop. Halprin then spoke about the objectives of the theatre-and-therapy workshop. From the point of view of therapy, the objective was to get in touch with one's own feelings through movement exercises concentrated on the rib cage. The part of the workshop related to theatre was the performing of these feelings for the rest of the group.

The participants were given a piece of paper and different colored crayons. Each person chose a particular space in the room and sat down to do a drawing of his rib cage. Before the actual drawing, Halprin asked participants to lie on their backs, close their eyes, and pay attention to the rib cage. She instructed them to think about the rib cage as a cage and to take whatever began to appear and to draw it. Upon completion, the participants left the drawing at the side of the room and found a place in the space to lie down. At this point, the movement exercises, concentrating on the rib cage, began.

Participants were instructed to close their eyes and rub their hands together, listening to the sound produced. Then they cupped their hands over their eyes and imagined breathing in-and-out through the eyes. Halprin requested that an attempt be made to empty the head of all thought. The hands moved down the body until they rested on the rib cage. Contact was made with the rhythms of breathing, and the participants expressed in movement what they felt at that moment. Each participant was asked to compose a sentence in his head beginning with "Now I am in touch with \_\_\_\_\_." From the word that completed this first sentence, they were to compose a new sentence. The group was given two minutes to get rid of "negative feelings." (An example Halprin gave of negative feeling was tension in a particular part of the body.) Once returned to a relaxed position, they were to express in their faces what they were feeling and to make eye contact with another member of the group. After eye contact was made, each person moved slowly toward the member with whom he had made contact.

The next exercise, called "leading and following," was executed by the couples who had formed at the end of the previous exercise. One person led by holding the wrists of the other, who had his eyes closed. They both sat down with legs extended in front. The person with eyes closed fell forward and breathed out, making a sound. Afterwards, the leader supported his partner as he lay down on the floor and moved with him as he changed positions. Eventually, the submissive partner finished by lying on his stomach. He was instructed to breathe through the rib cage. His partner was to observe the movement of the rib cage and to apply pressure to points where there appeared to be no movement. Pressure was to be applied until the partner let out a sound. Roles were then exchanged and the process was repeated.

Afterwards, the couples separated, and each person found a space in the room to lie down on his back. Participants were instructed to breathe while being aware of the vibrations coming from the rib cage. Halprin told the group to find a word that would correlate to the mental sound coming from the rib cage and from this sound to make up a sentence. Throughout the process, continued attention was paid to the rib cage. After each person had a sentence, he developed a series of movements emanating from the chest that expressed the entire sentence.



*"I want love."*

Photo Laurie Grunberg

Participants then took another piece of paper and some crayons and made another drawing of the rib cage, writing the sentence they had composed underneath it. Afterwards, this drawing was compared to the original drawing.

Everyone was asked to sit in a semicircle. A chair was placed in the center. One by one, participants got up, sat in the chair, and proceeded to perform their "dance" (the movement that expressed the sentence they had composed), saying their sentence aloud. Since the understanding of the score was subjective and personal, each dance was very different. After each dance, Halprin requested that those watching applaud as an acknowledgment of the performance that had taken place.

One woman did her dance and said her sentence, which was "I want love." When she had finished, Halprin told her to sit in the chair without moving and repeat the sentence. At one point, the woman began to cry. Halprin instructed her to address the words "I want love" to individual members of the group and to move toward one member that she felt could give her what she wanted. She approached one participant. She was crying and repeating "I want love," while he held her in his arms. Halprin told her to relax the rib cage and to remove the tension from that part of the body so that she would be able to receive the love that was being offered her. Halprin instructed her to move around the circle and to hold other members of the group in an embrace, remembering to keep the rib cage relaxed. (Commenting on this particular experience after the workshop, Halprin remarked, "She sat up there in the chair with all the holdings-on in her sternum, and she said 'I want love.' She is not going to get love until she is ready to receive love by letting go in the rib cage.")

The afternoon session began with free dancing to music. This developed into "leading and following to music" as couples were formed. The couples closed their eyes and moved together. The exercise that followed was called "passive and active." Halprin divided the participants into two groups: one active and the other passive. The passives were not to move on their own. Each active was told to choose a passive and to lead him in a series of movements to music. Afterwards, roles were reversed.

New couples were formed, and the participants were asked to continue with the leading and following, allowing a reversal of roles to come about during the process of moving together, so that one person would be leader, then another, and eventually, perhaps, no one would be leading, but they would just be moving together. During this



exercise, the couples were told to close their eyes and to allow the movement to take over by concentrating on it. Then they imagined themselves transformed into animal, vegetable or mineral, still continuing the movement with the partner. After awhile, they were instructed to come back to human form but as another person and to listen to what this person had to communicate to them.

After the completion of this "transformation" exercise, the participants shared verbally what had occurred. Halprin was most interested in what human form they had gotten in touch with. One man said that he had imagined himself nine years old again and had experienced the freedom and spontaneity he had felt at that age.

In an interview, Halprin spoke of her objectives:

*The objective that I put out by using the word 'therapy' in the title [of the workshop] was to focus on that aspect of the experience that would allow us to be in a soft place where our feelings could be revealed. It would be a safe place to cry, to scream, to deal with uncomfortable feelings because these feelings would be honored, acknowledged and restored. I deliberately went into the most vulnerable area in the body, the rib cage. It is where the armor goes first. You start taking the armor off the chest and you make people vulnerable.*

*What makes this theatre is that the scores are performed with the awareness that the other people are witnessing it as a public performance. From a therapeutic point of view, the witnesses give objectivity, intensity, and validation to the performance. This approach to theatre allows the witnesses an opportunity to experience the performer going through a real life crisis and transformation. Any time you witness other people perform this way, it helps you understand how to do it, too. And you get a chance to enlarge yourself by empathizing with the unique reality of some other person's consciousness in one of its most deep levels. There is something absolutely universal about shedding an old pattern and getting a new one. It is a death and rebirth and the witnesses can see this and the performer go through it.*

This type of workshop is only one example of the relation of theatre and therapy. The San Francisco Dancers' Workshop's year-long, full-time training program at present includes: Daily Rituals (a series of movements that form the movement vocabulary of the group, executed daily); advanced workshops limited to certain members of the Dancers' Workshop; Portraits (painting a self-portrait and dancing it out in front of the group—see T59); community workshops in which the group and the members of a community perform a score that is related to a community, such as a church, prison, city, etc.; and the Trance Dance, the only public performance based on audience participation. Each of these activities is connected to the idea of theatre and therapy on an individual or community level.

Halprin commented:

*Currently, I am directing a year-long series of three workshops for the people of San Francisco at the San Francisco Museum of Art, during which hundreds of people of all ages and social milieu have an opportunity to participate in the workshop performance process. The dancers workshop also has a reach-out program gathering people from minority and ethnic groups and incorporates into the workshop process the life-style differences of our population, which has a tremendous impact on the way we use therapy and theatre. And lastly, I am deeply involved in movement as healing and healing dances using new techniques in visualization combined with the application of various approaches to body work (Rolfing, Polarity Therapy, Kinesiology, Lomi, and so forth). In all of these areas of exploration and performance, theatre and therapy is interrelated on an individualistic and community level, offering a cross-cultural way of making whole the mind, body, and emotions.*