

## HOPE AND HELPLESSNESS IN THE POST-COVID DRAMA, THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE CLASSROOM

**We are all living through a collective worldwide period of unknowns, a traumatic period of helplessness and fatigue, which in turn potentiates reactions and triggers fears from previous traumas and from previous generations.**

**(Marcow Speiser and Speiser, p.315)**

It is a cliché but perhaps a truism to say that we are living in difficult and changing times. In addition to COVID we could discuss the environmental crisis, war, or the election of populist governments around the world. In terms of arts education, we could note the move towards a neoliberal model that has put pressure on subjects that do not fit neatly into a model of vocationality, or which fail to promise a quick financial return.

The quotation at the top of this article from arts therapists Vivien Marcow Speiser and Philip Speiser suggest that in such times we find ourselves in conversation with our ancestors and our past. They also suggest that at such times we find ourselves in conversation with others in the present, and that we need to work together to find solutions to the difficulties.

In this paper I'm interested in considering how we configure the notion of a group or a social body after a pandemic where groups have been a source of fear (due to the risk of illness) or illegality (due to limitations on social interaction). I will suggest that the difficulties for many led to a sense of helplessness. However I will attempt to articulate hope in these times. I will do this by engaging with a theory that originates from group psychoanalysis, Earl Hopper's notion of the 'fourth basic assumption' of a group. Through gaining an understanding of how a group engages with the unexpressed pain and difficulty of a social moment, I argue, lies the possibility of hope, change and transformation. I will conclude by considering briefly how these ideas might be applied to the group of the drama, theatre and performance classroom.

There has been much discussion of how COVID has influenced group behaviour. Alexander Haslam, for example, suggests that its difficulties unleashed both a need to

establish that “we are all in this together”, but simultaneously a sense that many were excluded from this ‘together’ness. He suggests that Huo’s prediction that the pandemic would “unleash a wave of prejudice and racism – particularly against Asians – proved correct” (Haslam, p.2). Citing Tajfel and Turner, he goes on, “the social ties that bind people together into a social group and that support positive relations within it can also engender antagonism toward those outside the group who appear to threaten it” (Haslam, p.4). Or, I might add, towards those outside the group over whom the group has power, offering the group an opportunity to reassert this power at a time when it feels disenfranchised.

Such an argument chimes with poetry therapist Shanee Stepakoff’s identification of a link between the growth of racism and the pandemic: “People are feeling vulnerable, scared and threatened and so they jump to simplistic approaches” (Stepakoff 2020, quoted in Marcow Speiser and Speiser, p.313).

The sense of feeling vulnerable, scared and threatened reflects the considerable evidence of mental health issues caused by the pandemic. Vindegaard and Benros’ 2020 meta-analysis reported reduced well-being and higher scores in anxiety and depression compared with pre-pandemic levels (cited in Haas, p.26). Salari’s systematic review and metaanalysis with data from over 100000 people in July 2020 suggested that in the period up to May 2020 over 30% of the world’s population suffered from stress, 32% from anxiety, and almost 34% from depressive symptoms (cited in Haas, p.26). And Xiong’s systematic study of data from eight countries found “relatively high rates of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and stress in the general population” (cited in Haas, p.26). Indeed, a new form of PTSD, COVID stress syndrome, was identified (Haas, p.28).

The impact of pandemics on mental health has been recognised throughout history. In the plague during the Middle Ages, according to Haas, “as the psychosocial stress continued, behaviours such as excessive piety and rampant forms of superstition and a ‘brutalisation of morals’ to the point of violence against others developed”, and in particular he identifies anti-Semitism (Haas, pp.20-21). Such behaviour led to a physician and poet of

the time to advise people to “Avoid all excitement, all anger and horror, in short, everything which causes emotion” (quoted in Haas, p.21). And Haas too outlines what he calls a “hierarchy of defence mechanisms” in response to such difficult situations which move from a ‘narcissistic’ to ‘immature, ‘neurotic’ and finally ‘mature’ response, which contains ‘deferring needs’, ‘sublimation’ and ‘suppression’ (Haas, p.13). But I want to challenge this. Underneath the deferral, sublimation and suppression, whether in the Middle Ages or in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, lies a great deal of emotion and experience that will in time resurface if not processed. And what lies beneath the surface of suppression may be elements that it is important to be more aware of, such as the racism mentioned earlier. Just because it’s not being expressed doesn’t mean it’s not there.

### **Generation Z & The Drama, Theatre & Performance Classroom during COVID**

Arguably, a group disproportionately affected by COVID was young adults. Citing Imran’s metastudy, Haas identifies how isolation and quarantine particularly impact the psychological well-being of children and adolescents (Haas, p.28). And according to Hunt and Wooster, a February 2021 study of young adults aged 18–24 showed that “28 per cent stat[ed] they had had suicidal thoughts in the previous two weeks” (Hunt and Wooster, p.395). Overall, for young people the experience of the pandemic was particularly distressing and confusing.

And the individualism of the neoliberal world they are in may make this particularly difficult. For example, Curran and Hill’s 2017 study shows that students are becoming more individualistic, and that their “communal skills have waned; [...neoliberalism] emphasise[s] competitiveness, individualism, and irrational ideals of the perfectable self” (cited in Kandil and te Bokkel, p.377). In such a world the unfamiliarity of groups might be something that is feared rather than embraced. Furthermore, the neoliberal education system means that, according to Kandil and te Bokkel, “skills and knowledge don’t account to much unless they translate into economic value” (Kandil and te Bokkel, p.377). And for students of drama,

theatre and performance, the vision of education as a source of economic value can look bleak. Sibanda suggests, “given that [...] theatre and film had been battered by the political and economic crisis and still operated only semi-professionally, these industries [...] offered little promise of employment to prospective and graduating students” (Sibanda, p.291). And beyond all this, the communal experience of live drama, theatre and performance that our students often cite as a key reason for their love of the subject got lost during the pandemic. As Ross Prior puts it, “A smile, a touch and a gesture have all contained rich meaning and comfort in participatory events. Suddenly, for much of the world, this ceased from the first part of 2020” (Prior, p.244).

### **Helplessness and Trauma**

If it seems that I am taking you down an unremittingly bleak alley, this is deliberate. Rather than viewing ‘deferring needs’, ‘sublimation’ and ‘suppression’ as mature, as outlined by Haas earlier, I want to propose the need to acknowledge the suffering the pandemic has caused. Professor and expressive arts therapist Steve Levine suggests

Not only individually but also in our social relations we must find a way of living hopefully with suffering. [...] Living in this liminal space with the uncertainty brings up so much that we just don’t know about. We have to work together and hold the hope that things can change and be better (Steve Levine, quoted in Marcow Speiser and Speiser, p.310)

Levine’s comment is interesting to me for a number of reasons. Firstly, he suggests the possibility of hope and suffering co-existing, rather than attempting to repress one or the other. Secondly, he emphasises the need for members of a society to work together whilst acknowledging that this may require an embracing of uncertainty. And finally he acknowledges the need for hope. I will discuss hope more in the later stages of this paper, but for now it is worth recognising that “the hope that things can change and be better” simultaneously holds within it the recognition of the difficulty of the present and the possibility that things may change or be better. We’re hoping for change from what we have – but we don’t know if it’s going to happen.

Levine says elsewhere, "I find myself striving always towards integration, motivated by a hope for wholeness and reconciliation. It is this activity of working through disintegration that I consider to be at the core of the creative and therapeutic processes" (quoted in Marcow Speiser and Speiser, p.309-10). For Levine, disintegration has to be worked through before integration can be reached. And this is where I want to introduce Earl Hopper's notion of The Fourth Basic Assumption.

In referring to the fourth basic assumption, Hopper is referencing the psychoanalytic work of Wilfred Bion. Bion "postulated that when any group met, there were two groupings present: the work group, there to fulfil the conscious purpose of the group, and another unconscious grouping in which the participants followed, at different times, what he called basic assumption behaviour to avoid the work and purpose of the group" (Hopper and Weinberg, p.327). The three basic assumptions that make up this behaviour, he claimed, are dependency (idealising the leader of the group), the fight/flight response (uniting the group against an external enemy), and pairing between group members.

Hopper's fourth basic assumption posits the tendency, particularly in times of difficulty and trauma, of the individuals within the group to move between aggregation – being a group of disparate and discrete elements - and massification – where the constituent members want to merge with each other. He depicts this visually in the tendency of flamingos who try to keep separate from each other, and walruses who seek to merge with each other (Hopper, 2003, p.69). Aggregation allows the group to find role differentiation and individual specificity, and massification is an attempt to form an idealised group (Hopper 1997, p.455). Hopper suggests that there is an optimal degree of cohesion in groups (Hopper, 2003, p.25), but this is not an idealised point which can be identified and pinned down. Rather, incohesion inevitably occurs as group members engage in what Christine Thornton describes as "a non-dialectical oscillation between the two positions" (Thornton, 2019, p.71). As such, Hopper's fourth basic assumption has been argued to depict the

fundamental characteristic of a group, elaborating “the most basic tension in a group: that between individual identity and group identity” (Thornton, 2019, p.11).

Such incohesion is ultimately, for Hopper, a response to the fear of annihilation which stems from “the experience of profound helplessness arising from traumatic loss, abandonment and damage” (Hopper 1997, p.448). Loss, abandonment and damage: perhaps a fitting description to the experience of COVID for many. Writing well before COVID, Hopper suggests that “the fear of annihilation and various forms of protection against it are magnified by the inability to mourn adequately and authentically” (Hopper, 2003, p.60). From this perspective, paying attention to the sense of helplessness in hard times, acknowledging the pain and mourning, will ultimately reduce the fear of annihilation and the destructive behaviour that may occur in the group context – and potentially beyond the group into wider society.

In other words, facing up to the sense of helplessness may also lead to hope. But the hope is not naïve: Hopper distinguishes between ‘mature hope’ and ‘infantile hope’. He says, “When infantile hope is thwarted, feelings of bitterness and denigration are likely to arise. In contrast, when mature hope is thwarted, feelings of disappointment and vulnerable sorrow are likely to be followed by the emergence of new hope” (Hopper, 2001, p.212). The mature phase is only possible when the infantile phase has been worked through and processed.

### **The Drama, Theatre and Performance Classroom**

So what does all this mean as we shift focus to the drama, theatre and performance classroom? Drama, theatre and performance are often argued as being at root – or at least that they can be - a liminal space, a place to collectively explore and create alternative selves and worlds that live on the edge of the present moment and offer alternative visions of the past, present and future. But post COVID, I think of Jon McKenzie’s famous notion of

the 'liminal norm' of performance studies (McKenzie, 2001), and I note theatre professor Natalie Alvarez's outlining of a project she runs as being "a means of organising and bringing together multiple voices rather than just being on the edge" (Alvarez and Solga, p.262). She talks about seeing performance studies as an "interdiscipline"; being 'inter' – amongst disciplines – amongst a range of voices - celebrating its capacity to engage with other disciplines. From Hopper's notion of the fourth basic assumption we might imagine the project as setting off a noisy plethora of perspectives trying to find an optimal cohesion, and through which learning and enquiry takes place.

I will conclude with a drama, theatre and performance project that similarly employs the concept of 'inter' in its engagement with intersubjectivity. In her article 'Towards a concept of inefficiency in performance and dialogue practice', Linda Taylor outlines her Operations of Dialogue project. A conversation is set up around a particular topic – in the specific example she cites, Nationhood. The whole project lasts for two weeks. It begins with student actors participating in an hour and a half discussion where they share their own views. These discussions are recorded, and then watched back. The group then performs a twenty minute "edit" of the discussion. The performer is then invited to acknowledge three of their own vocal and physical habits that they use to win an argument, along with three physical and vocal habits that someone they know uses to win an argument. From then the participants individually meet different experts and non-experts in the subject, chosen by the project leader in relation to the views of the specific participant, and are invited to listen to the other's perspective. They then come together to revisit their 'verbatim version' of the discussion but now honed down to a 12 minute edit, consider how to present the material as a performance to an audience, and how to involve the audience in both the performance itself and a post-performance discussion.

Taylor's discussion of the process is fascinating. In the second part where participants talk about the physical and vocal strategies they and others use, she identifies their detailed reflections as offering a growing awareness of what they were doing in the

conversation that stopped them really listening to the other. What I find particularly interesting in this section is that the activity of analysing their own behaviour does not lead to them finding a consensus of opinion. In fact Taylor notes that the students realised how their desire for consensus in the initial discussion actually stopped them engaging with a 'rational' consideration of the details of the argument. One might imagine, drawing on Hopper's fourth assumption model, that they recognised their desire to massify. Equally, however, reflection might help them see their desire to mark themselves as different from others in the group, leading to difference or conflict (in an 'aggregation' mode). The important thing here is that the activities bring attention to what is normally hidden within the unconscious of the group relationships.

As the activities build on each other, the initial discussion is revisited as a "reconstructive practice" (p.346), with a heightened awareness of different perspectives and of the sorts of strategies that might be used to achieve agreement or persuasion. Indeed, the term 'strategies' is apposite: Taylor draws on Habermas' term "strategic action" to identify such behaviour, which she sees as the neoliberal norm (p.346) where a desire for consensual efficacy "is guided by qualities such as measurability, predictability and efficiency" (p.334).

However, *Operations of Dialogue* celebrates what she calls "an ethics of inefficiency" (p.346), and she draws on Habermas' notion of communicative action, which functions oppositionally to strategic action. She suggests "The heart of communicative action therefore is not the solution arrived at or the agreement reached – there may not be one – but rather the maintenance of an open space in which claim meets counter-claim, underpinned by a mutual 'deep listening.' It is a process that is time-consuming, non-teleological and inefficient, one that does not and cannot guarantee an answer" (Taylor, p.337). Nonetheless, in the "facilitation of intersubjective and collective learning processes" (Taylor, p.336) it is possible to see individuals in the group beginning to understand how they relate to each other. Like the group struggling to find an optimal level of cohesion in Hopper's model, at one moment there may be a pull towards finding resolution between the



different voices on this emotive topic; at another it may be tempting to pull away from resolution to maintain a clear sense of self-identity.

In the post-COVID classroom, foregrounding the helplessness that some may feel as they struggle to negotiate a huge number of difficulties may not be efficient as we know it. There may be an understandable desire to get back to normal. But at a time when the neoliberal world often feels inescapable, the difficulties of the pandemic might have created an irrepressible need and opportunity to look at ourselves and question what we do; a need to consider the nature of our relations with others in the room, groups beyond the room, and ultimately the world beyond. As Paul Heyne asserts, “‘what we value determines what we will consider efficient and inefficient’ (1994, 24, quoted in Taylor, p.335), and if we value mental health and understanding our relationships with others, the “intersubjective dialogue” offered by projects like Taylor’s might make a difference. For a society needing to repair, they might be very efficient indeed.

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