

Therapeutic puppetry in Germany. Links to sciences and arts

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The Broken Puppet. A Symposium on Puppetry, Disability and Health

Therapeutic puppeteers in Germany

Since 2014 I have been working as a freelance therapeutic puppeteer in a yellow painted cellar studio in Halle/Saale. Every day I am fascinated by the puppet's ability for opening doors and setting things in motion just by playing. It is truly a little bit like magic...

As everywhere in the world a lots of German interested puppeteers, teachers, psychologists use puppets for healing or social aims. In the DGTP, our union, you find them all. As freelancer there are occational and speech therapists, psychologists and non-medical practitioners. They can be payed by the health fund. The other possibility is a contract with the youth welfare office or private clients.

Employed therapists there are in multi disciplinary clinical teams. They use therapeutical puppetry for diagnostics, improving self-confidence and initial parental work.

Social group workers in day care for difficult children or mentally ill adults use therapeutical puppetry as well. But all together therapeutic puppetry is only little known yet.

I do therapeutic puppetry with children in difficult situations like mentally ill or addicted parents, divorces, mourning, being a foster child, migration, trauma etc. I have a contract with the youth welfare office.

I use puppets as a psychotherapist and social worker adopting the method by the Swiss Käthy Wüthrich and Klaus Harter and the German Gudrun Gauda. It is depth psychology based on the archetypes and the theory of lifelong individuation by C.G. Jung.

The method works with archetypal handglove puppets and symbolic props on a improvised ironboard- or table-scenery. Hereby the child or client is the director and creates his world. I help him to get his story on the stage, but without audience. We are just playing together for this moment like children role play.

Afterwards I make photographs of the most important scenes, notice my emotions and transferences and try an interpretation of the symbols.

The structure of a playing session is very simple but important: There is one hour, are two people and three rules. These rules are:

1. Puppets can do and say everything, even what we humans are not able or allowed to.
2. We don't destroy materials and don't hurt each other because there would be no playing anymore.
3. Both of us can say "STOP" if we are tired, if there is something wrong or unclear. So we would lay the puppets down, have a break, talk and then start playing again.

The standard start is the so called "Dreierdynamik", dynamic of three: to choose three props, three puppets and third: to build a scenery, where this figures could meet. I am flexible with this conditions because the main goal is to get the client involved in the play and to really stage a story.

This structure and the straight kept promise that the client is the leader through the story establishes a safe room – basis for free thinking, playing, growing, healing.

I am not the teacher. I am the assistant with the fitting materials, I am the companion to share the experience, I am the escort on the clients way. Surly I am older and wiser than a child, but I only offer my view and ideas as ones beneath other possibilities.

Often I am surprised by the wisdom and accuracy of the childrens solutions. And so do they! Other methods like working with fairy-tales, fantasy travels, drawing and of course moulding own puppets complete the sessions.

Usually we have one hour a week over a whole year and this is ideal.

We know many things without being conscious of them. But we use them. Clear deeply inside we hardly can explain them: "Children have to play", "The Puppet is a powerfull miracle", "Art is free and human" - sure, but why??? If you not only want to adore the wonder but want to use it as a craft, you have to catch the puzzle pieces and explore their outlines.

For Therapeutic Puppetry I found them in performing art sciences, dramaturgy, semiotics, culture theory, pedagogy, play science, developmental psychology, attachment theory, archetypal images and individuation by C.G. Jung, studies and interpretations of fairy-tales (Bruno Bettelheim, Verena Kast), neurobiology, trauma-pedagogy, systemic and other therapeutical approaches and last but not least my personal studies of behavior and relationships.

Performing arts

Artists know about story telling in pictures: You can find an image for every unthinkable circumstance. If it is well designed, this image is authentically true felt in the inner. Puppetry sets it distanced safe in the outer. This are two items to work with: *Safety* and *real emotions* are needed for changing impulses.

For me as a theatre scientist puppet theatre is a kind of performing arts. As every art it is communication about existential human themes by symbols and metaphors. The artist offers a designed product, the recipient “reads” it productively. You have a stage as the expounded place for the agreement between artist and audience: There will be shown something meaningful. The special sign language is constituted through the animated object, the puppet. The puppet can be an art object itself. But the bearing thing is the enlivenment of dead material as a sign of alive human being. It is highest masterpiece to show material as alive.

Therapeutical puppetry uses the moved puppet more as a mask, as a material shield, like a toy. That’s why the art of enlivenment is not our task. But we use the physicalness and the meaningfulness as well.

Or otherways: The client is the actor, the director and his own audience. He produces images full of individual meaning and receives it himself.

Play theory

Therapeutical puppetry uses the play as a *lowlevel* dooropener: families often are sceptical of external persons, youth welfare office, critical pedagogues and so on. I invite the child (or later even the mother) for playing: one hour out of time, like an island, nothing can be done wrong, extraordinary materials are tempting, fun is included. A few sessions later I invite the parents to have a look what their grandious child has been acting. With enthusiasm I can tell motives of the stories and show photos (What I clarified with the child before): parents can be proud and are not blamed like mostly if the speech is about their family. But surely the parents read the message in the scenery pictures more clearly than me. Often they get another view on their child: there is no competition because of just playing. They are memorized of their own childhood and their high hopes when becoming parents. The play establishes a not dangerous *Meta-level* to draw near intimate family problems. Parents are thawing and ask: “What can we do?” - and thats the start of a working relationship.

Playing is the *natural children's way to integrate phenomenons* of the outer objective world into ones undescribed brain. After birth nerves structures are there but blank. An individual system of images and cognition grows by sensing and acting and getting mirror reactions of others. This goes close to concept formation and speech acquisition. Playing is learning by transforming outer world under emotional evaluation into consistent psychologic structures. Ability to reason slowly comes at the age of 7 and it does not replace playing. Play is not only the nice amusement without any goal, it is the constituting human way of learning and getting the world inside.

And for young children it is the *only* way of expressing and understanding. It is determined by egocentric thinking and the animism. This perfectly fits puppetry.

So puppet playing and story improvising brings information about the child's view and has a direct influence on its further visions of life.

Puppetry is a laboratory. Role playing consists of acting as-if in a safe room with lower consequences. Social learning by models is possible as well as emotional relief. Fantasy and emotions fire and focus attention.

Acted contents is *symbolised* – intensified by the created expression of the puppets. Here is another difference to the theatre. Theatre puppets are made for a certain drama with special dramaturgical efforts banished into material. The therapeutical puppet plays different figures, it is a real actor. Its archetypal look is animated to a concrete individual character of a figure. And this figure is our discussed object or subject: what is the character like? Why? In everytime? What does he want?

Somedays the father looks like a king, other days like a thief or a ghost – the client chooses different puppets just fitting that moment. You can even take these as parts of one personality. Otherways the same puppet can figure different characters: My “Grandma” has been a witch too...

Later we can imagine what to do with the witch and find a solution – always under the cover of a played story. Here the puppet as a substitute gets its task. We don't have to leave that toy-material shelter and still do a hard work: We struggle, we rescue, we find treasures, we make love, we punish.

Puppets build a safe platform on complicate themes. The world of play is not dangerous, but liberating and constructive, just human structured.

Trauma-pedagogy

During the last years trauma therapy layed more attention on stabilization of the client than on the confrontation as main goal (Michaela Huber, Luise Reddemann). This stabilization can be done by everyone engaged, empathizing and aware. Therefore trauma-pedagogy spreads this knowledge of a few important points:

- Make a difference between past and present clear and perceptible. Be HERE and NOW with every cell. *Physical actions and concentrating tasks are useful. LIVE PERFORMANCE*
- Explain to the brain what happened to the feelings and thinkings in time of shock and suffer. *Meta-level speaking and structures are useful. REFLECTION , SETTING*
- Make a distance to events. *Pictures and humor are useful. ART LANGUAGE*
- Give the client the control back which he lost in time of powerlessness. Give him possibility to deside and accept this. *Transparency and visible actions are useful. DIRECTION*
- Give a fundament when pondering. Get feet on the ground. *Constructive and developing things are useful. STAGING*
- Give an alive example of predictable and truthful relationship. *Security, attention and fairness are useful. COMPANIONSHIP*
- Brain can not make an emotional difference between memories and imaginations. New connections allow to anchor old floating pictures. *Activly self-made kindly images are useful. PLAYING*
- Make new experiences beside older. *New matters and fantasy are usefull. STORY*

Total the useful facts and you have puppetry!

Attachment theory.

Today the Basic Trust is commonly known. The complete ego development, behavioral strategies and personal relationships base on the first year of one's life.

But the important message is: If you developed a bad attachment style by any lacking, you are not lost. It can be nourished by other persons and in later times too. The therapist as a playing tutor can fulfill the essential attachment needs.

Prominent signs for a secure attachment offer are:

- sensitivity to the needs of the other, right interpretation and promptly fulfilling in the right kind and size
- Consistency of the reaction feeds the feeling that someone hears you and cares. You can trust. You can hope.

In a successful playing team you always have to look for the needs of the others, be close to each other, give trust. You are welcome just as you are, just for being there, your wish is not questioned – marks like a baby's existence. Playing allows the therapist to fulfill every wish: everything is possible, everything is prompt. He gives the client what he needs in this moment: understanding, privacy, knowhow, solidarity and realizes the client inspired scenes by creating and acting to have an impressive experience.

So this special playing structure realizes important relationship work. It is a little bit like feeding. Adults as well as children can accept this from a strange person under the premise of play.

- The so-called “Attachment seesaw” (K.-H. Brisch): Someone will only start exploration if his attachment system is relaxed, if he feels safe and well nourished. Someone can become Columbus if he is securely anchored.

Finishing a puppet play the client gets the feeling of a doable world full of possibilities waiting for him. This experience often is new to the player and would hardly meet him in his temporal environment. So leaving the playing room the client has the best self-confidence - at least in that moment. But better once than never.

Neurobiology. Enthusiasm

Tomography and messenger chemistry nowadays better explain our common experiences of learning.

Even the progressive educators of the beginning 20th century knew that the brain is more than a container of facts and that successful learning answers to interests.

The pupil has no idea of the learning matter one week after the test but he knows all the scores of his favorite team of the last five years...

Now we have photos of rising synapses and brain structures caused by enthusiasm!

Real enthusiasm is the most important condition for learning, not only a tasty morsel for Pawlow's dog.

Emotions are the filter to the other regions of the brain: memories, imaging, thinking, consciousness (or unconsciousness), vegetal and physical functions, reflexes, behavior impulses, learning. The emotional evaluation comes from the survival layer and that's why it is the strongest.

Puppetry fires emotions. We are awake, we are ready to listen, to watch, to learn.

By the way: Here lays a great danger to misapply puppets!

If we are in good feeling playing, we don't need to say: attention please! We have the focus and all antennas on reception. Survival is safe and so the curiosity and the gap filling preference of our human brains start to work. They are hunting gratification which are good feelings again, made by chemical messengers.

So puppetry is chemistry and cell raising at last. It is an important argument to all the ambitious school parents: puppetry and story telling are catalysts for children's brains. (Gerald Hüther)

Fairy-tale studies. Dramaturgy

My experiences tell that most improvised stories show a *dramaturgical structure* too:

- *starting up setting*: Where does the story begin? Who is there and what character has he? What does he usually do?
- *Further* and further, then by then...
- *Who else comes?* What can be done with the props?
- *What happens?* a sudden great change, an unavoidable consequence, a amazing metamorphosis...
- What does *the end* looks like?

Every of this points needs a decision of the director-client. He makes it, he watches it, he changes or accepts it. There is a guiding line for free individual fantasy. Inner disorder figures to a plot. Possibilities are boundless but not random in dramaturgy.

The figure of the highest identification mostly shows reference to the *hero of a fairy-tale*. (Max Lüthi). He suffers or has to meet a task. If he gets on his way, he has the chance to win everything. If he moves, there will be help. There will be worst catastrophes, but hope in every little light too. It seems those story structures are archetypical all over the world and for all times. They seem to lay in our genes. And so does our ability of self-healing: If we are moving, changes become possible.

Fairy-tales, known or new created, are talented emotion tamers and life counselors in that way. Fairy-tales are not logical but their special rules make *sense*.

Hereby they touch central items of **psychotherapy**.

- The highest level of human and individual searching is *sense* (Robert Dilts: Neuro-Linguistic Programming). We accept what makes sense to us, we construct sense, we get satisfaction from a meaningful life. Story telling is an easy archetypal sense finder.
- *Puppettherapy as a special method* uses the developing model of C.G. Jung, concretised by Klaus Harter. They say psychological development happens by encounter. Play always is encounter.
- Harters model shows individual development as steps from inherent being over young with nourish efforts and emanzipating resister to the superior in his own empire. Life themes develop from emotional and rational focus to parents-childs-peers, sexual relationships and social engagment. Every of this steps or themes can be lacked by different reasons. It does not depend on the age and the mental possibilities! It is a question of emotional ripening and structural integration in one's self-image. It will direct one's behavior, conduct disorders or relationship conflicts.
The good message is: These steps and themes can ripen retroactive!
- Even in *traumatherapy* the new approach of Neuro-sequential Afterripening (Bruce D. Perry) reports of sensory and corporal stimulated effects of psychological ripening.
- In puppetry you see that what is done, can be done in another way too. What has been set, can be put away. Bad luck touched you, but you are more: you are the director to transform experiences.
- No medium gives a better hothouse than the play, intensed by puppetry: sheltered symbolic distance, intentional free play, concretly acting, emotional guided, completely under self-control, opening and constructing spaces, creating sense. Your stories make up leeway, bring the emotional value to store, set new experiences beside others, heal the trauma, ripe the structures as we have shown.

Thanks for the puppets and you for your attention!