

London Psychodrama Network - Starting Open Sessions

How do practitioners set about presenting psychodrama to the public?

On a rainy Sunday afternoon in October 2006, 9 practitioners and trainers met in the Queen Elizabeth Hall foyer to discuss the possibilities of running Open Psychodrama sessions to the public. The reasons for this were twofold, 1) to publicise psychodrama and 2) to set up a network for psychodrama within London. Two years later, we have called ourselves the 'London Psychodrama Network' and successfully presented 10 taster evenings, with further evenings in the pipeline. We thought we would write about how this came to life.

Getting Started

Our first meeting arose from a thought that more could be done to promote psychodrama in the nation's capital. So when we telephoned people to ask if they were interested in meeting for a coffee, most people readily accepted. It was exciting meeting with fellow psychodramatists who included; Marcia Karp, Richard Oliver, Chip Chimera, Malka Bellamy, John Murphy, Maxine Daniels, Gillian Woodward, Janine Turkie, and Dusan Potkonjak. We were pleased to meet colleagues from our own city because we normally only see each other once a year at conference. There was plenty to chat about and ideas were aired. To catch the ideas and follow them up, we wrote minutes of the meeting and circulated them, a step towards our first taster evening. Marcia and Chip discussed the idea of running open sessions as we knew was happening in the States.

We all agreed this was a good idea and so we needed to plan how to proceed in order to make it happen.

Making a Timetable

From October 2006 to our first session in May 2007, we left a space of 7 months. In hindsight, these 7 months were needed to help us get started. Moreover, we found that we needed several preparatory meetings to decide what to do: Where would we find suitable premises? How would we publicise the event without spending money? Who would direct?

There was a lot to do - where would we begin? We had several pages of guidance notes provided by the Hudson Valley Psychodrama Institute who hold open sessions regularly. Looking at these, we had a framework since other people had been here before.

Finding a Director

This part was easy. Marcia Karp stepped forward and offered to direct. From the outset, we had an experienced director and her name attracted people to come along to our first evening. In fact, she directed our second evening too. Subsequently, we had different directors so that people could experience a different style of directing. Our directors have included: Marcia Karp, Olivia Lousada, Maxine Daniels, Chip Chimera, Dusan Potkonjak, and John Murphy.

The Right Premises

For our first sessions, we hired a room at RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. This is a prestige venue in the heart of London and we thought it was a good choice. However we discovered that the air conditioning was too powerful and that it could not be controlled without an engineer present. It's not helpful to have your audience shivering. It was also expensive and made it difficult to cover our fees.

We searched for more comfortable premises. One of us had run workshops at the Lancaster Hall Hotel. It's a central venue, it's a good space, the staff are accommodating, it has a warm feeling and the room is a nice size space. We have been using this hotel ever since and we believe that we will stick with it for the foreseeable future.

Creating our Publicity

We have an A4-size flyer and it was easy to write this. More difficult was how to get it into the hands of everyone who might want to attend. We chose the route of personal introduction. Our publicity is distributed by our 10 members to their friends and colleagues, and they tell their friends, and so on. Moreover, some of us have e-mail lists.

We issue the flyer a month before the event and bookings come in during the next few weeks. If bookings are looking low, we make further telephone calls or e-mails and ensure that we have an audience.

We aim to obtain an audience that are interested in psychodrama rather than people who are seeking therapy. Whilst we make it clear that no-one need do anything in the sessions that they are not happy about, we feel that this is not enough. We limit our publicity to people who we know. The result is that people attend who are interested in finding out about psychodrama, rather than people looking for a tool to cure something. As directors we have a strong emphasis on safety and containment in the sessions.

We ask people to reserve a place before attending any session. Reserving a place gives us an idea of likely numbers for the evening and helps us set out the seats. Furthermore, it allows us to have a list of names at the entrance and we can welcome people as they arrive, since they are expected. People may book by telephone or e-mail and we have noticed that almost all of the bookings are by e-mail.

Maintaining the Momentum

Initially, we asked each of our 10 members to encourage 3 people to come along. This worked well and the first sessions had 30-50 paying people attending. Yet quite soon the energy waned and members said they would like to help but they were exceptionally busy. During one month, it felt like almost everybody was saying this.

So we formed a core of 3 people who would maintain the momentum throughout the year, with others helping when they were available. The 3 people are Maxine Daniels, Chip Chimera, and Richard Oliver. We work together by telephone and e-mail, making the arrangements and sending out publicity, and it works.

Money does Matter

We have kept the entry fee for each taster evening at a nominal £10. This is paid on the door in cash or by cheque. In return, we offer a 2-hour evening, now extended to 2.5 hours to allow more time for sharing at the end.

The room hire is a fixed sum and we can never be sure that the income will cover this. At first, one member used their own funds to pay for the room and take the risk of whether they would be refunded. However, we realised this was wholly unfair so we asked members to contribute £40 each as a subscription to a joint fund to cover the advance costs of each evening. Since doing this we have been able to cover costs of the room hire and have money in reserve.

We now have a network of 10 members who have subscriptions. All of us are qualified and experienced psychodramatists living and practicing in greater London or just outside.

Processing for the Director

We found that after each session the director, however experienced, needs to process the session with his/her colleagues. Had they used an adequate warm-up? Were people sufficiently engaged in the work? Had there been any risk of going deeply into an issue? Was the sharing adequate? The director invariably appreciated some feedback. So each evening we stay behind and chat in the bar about how it all happened.

Feeling Supported as a Director

We have recently started nominating a person to support the director not only during the evening but also in the weeks beforehand. What title should the evening be given? What would be an appropriate warm-up? Should we invite people to talk in pairs, in small groups, or stay as a whole group? We hope that having a supporting person will be a welcome addition for the director.

Looking back, we have noticed how the attitude of the people who have attended has changed. In the early stages, they may have said: 'I might attend. I have a lot going on. I will see.' Now they are likely to ask us: 'When is your next psychodrama evening. I want to come along.'

We all believe the Network is becoming more established in London and whilst there is a temptation not to run a session every month, we feel the continuity is important. We have also been discussing the possibility of organising day events in the future to offer different psychodrama workshops to people on the same day.

Our shared philosophy is to keep psychodrama alive and kicking in London and use the Network as a shared experience for psychodramatists as well. Long may we continue.

Richard Oliver, Maxine Daniels, Chip Chimera