Chrissie Poulter

Playing with Pain: the Need for Guardianship in Group Work

Chrissie Poulter read Drama and Theatre Arts at Birmingham University from 1973 to 1976, and was taught by Clive Barker during her first year there. Now a Lecturer at Trinity College Dublin, her specialism is theatre games, so their paths continued to cross over the years. As a theatre director, deviser, and trainer her work centres on the use of play within and without the theatre world, with a particular focus on inter- and intra-cultural exchange. Her book *Playing the Game* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 1987) is a widely used manual of theatre games. Her most recent creative projects have been as one of the directors of *The Bus Project* – a site-specific project on a moving Dublin bus – for Performance Lab in the Dublin Fringe Festival in September 2007, and *Metamorphoses with Prey Trio*, a site-specific production with three musicians for the Mermaid Arts Centre in Bray, Co Wicklow, described in the preceding article by Lizbeth Goodman. Here, Chrissie Poulter takes theatre games as a springboard to discuss and define the need for 'guardianship' in game playing, online or in the studio workship.

I will go to my grave believing that the actor could be the most experimental social scientist in the world.

Clive Barker, *Theatre Games*, p. 213

THE LAST TIME I saw Clive Barker he was sitting on a stage surrounded by some of the mountains and molehills of his life's work. Each tumulus was covered over with a white sheet . . . because, of course, there was a game to be played before anyone found out what was there to be unearthed!

The situation was a symposium at Rose Bruford College in England, to which Clive had donated his personal archive. The musings and jottings, the research and reference works . . . the photos, the music, and more: a treasure trove awaiting an archivist to sort it out – since Clive, by his own admission, had never quite found the time to turn it into that next book or the next one, or the next one . . .

The game? Anyone in the audience could nominate a hillock, from which the white sheet would be swept away, revealing an object or a pile of programmes or a box of goodies which Clive would then proceed to describe and discuss (but not in that essay title sense). It was a joy to watch because he seemed as delighted to discover what was under each sheet as we were ourselves.

It had been over thirty years since I first encountered Clive, at my interview for a place as a drama student at Birmingham University, where he was then teaching. I had already been immersed in the world of theatre games as a teenager in a youth theatre group run by Carry Goorney and her colleagues Janet, Paul, and Jon who were setting up a company called Interplay in Leeds, my home town in Yorkshire. Their title was influenced by Carry's experience with Inter-Action in London, whose director Ed Berman had in turn brought his experience of the American New Games movement to his company's work. Clive was a member of the Board of Inter-Action and indeed has called Ed Berman a 'great games player' (*Theatre Games*, p. 116).

I was accepted onto the course and so experienced Clive's theatre games throughout my first year at his regular nine o'clock classes. We stretched muscles we didn't know we had in his physical games. We dropped from (what seemed like) great heights into the waiting arms of our colleagues. We wore blindfolds. We played children's games. We laughed and we screamed – a lot.

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And then there was the Court of the Holy Dido. Every time I have a bad experience in a workshop I wonder why it happened. As a trainer and director now, I learn from such experiences and adapt my practice, as no doubt I did as a participant in my youth.

As a youth I may have avoided a repetition by avoiding the activity altogether. As an academic I also wonder if the situation can be predicted and/or avoided in future while still reaping whatever benefits are to be gained from the specific exercise. One thing that occurs to me time and time again is that the director's role as Guardian is not always replicated when a group of people choose to borrow a game and play it amongst themselves. Nor is the Guardian necessarily there if the memory of the workshop is revisited by participants, outside the setting of the workshop, in a way which could be hurtful, damaging, or indeed dangerous for individuals who took part in the workshop itself and who may or may not be present at the revisiting.

Most disturbingly the Guardian might not be able to guard participants, during the actual workshop, from the dangers inherent in group work; from ignorance of the potential for abuse/misuse; from a lack of experience in dealing with how the work might affect participants; from a personal tendency to be careless or vindictive – and so on. Clive was a good Guardian – he even acknowledges the role in his book *Theatre Games*, where he says: 'One person must stand outside the exercise for the security of the group' (p. 112). But out of his hands his games, like all games, can be dangerous.

Now danger can be a great teacher – if well handled and if not sustained for too long. Take the many variations of chasing games that children play, the extreme sports that have young people and adults jumping out of planes, diving into water from great heights, or taking a fifty-fifty chance of being knocked unconscious in a boxing ring. These and many more examples bear testament to people's physical and mental bravery and to the pleasure that can be gained from overcoming fears and meeting challenges – like dropping from (what seemed like) great heights into the waiting arms of our colleagues.

And then there was the Court of the Holy Dido. Clive used this game as what he terms a 'control-of-emotional-reaction' game. Basically, a 'Court' is established with all players sitting in a circle and ranked from president down to the last person. The discipline of the court is maintained by using the Holy Dido, which lies at the feet of the president, to administer punishment to any player who laughs, smiles, speaks out of turn, or does not obey the detailed protocols laid down at the outset of the exercise. In Clive's version the Holy Dido is a rolled-up newspaper. He notes that 'Of all the games I play this is the one that is requested over and over again by every group I have worked with' (*Theatre Games*, p. 85).

He calls the game 'a rare training ground for comedians' and his focus is on how the players, having controlled the expression of their own emotions (which would otherwise incur punishment) move on to observing the other players with a view to noticing who is failing to observe the protocol (presumably the intention here is that the observer can call the attention of the Court to the offender in question). The final stage is deliberately to cause someone else to falter, laugh, etc., while not being observed doing so by the other players.

A clue to the potential dangers of the game lies in Clive's own comment:

> I learned this game in a Boy Scout troop in Middlesbrough as a child, where the Holy Dido was a knotted rope, which, with the terms Upper and Lower Deck, clearly points to its adult naval origins. *Theatre Games*, p. 85

Oh, what tales could no doubt be told of soldiers and sailors being punished for that step out of line, the flicker of nonconformity in a regimented sameness – and then that same discipline being tested to the hilt in 'enemy hands': imprisonment, torture, humiliation. And throughout it all the need to maintain dignity – to 'put on a brave face'.

Yet, as we also know, sometimes the humiliation and torture come from within a group – towards one or more of its own members. Sometimes the regiment is the family, the school, the local gang, complete with officers

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and codes of behaviour and feared punishment. Sometimes there are no officers, and a group becomes a mob and turns on the nearest prey. Sometimes it preys on itself.

I recall an experience of Clive's Trust Circle game which I witnessed get out of hand when a large group used it as a way to abuse trust – by hurling one young man around the circle in a way which made it obvious that they were expressing their dislike of him by doing so. In Clive's hands there would never have been so many people in the circle, but this group had borrowed what suited their intent. There's no safety catch on a game.

As for the Holy Dido . . . as a first-year student I recall how some players would delight in finding a way of making the rolled-up newspaper hurt. I've seen newspapers in shreds having been literally beaten to bits. Far from leading to the comic clowning inherent in Clive's comments above, unguided it became an explosion of cronyism, triumphalism, and the abuse of power. Indeed it would find an appropriate home in Augusto Boal's 'arsenal' of games – and maybe there it would be recognized for the powerful exploration of power and oppression it can be.

The most frightening aspect of the time I am recalling was that there was no way out of the game. One or two who started their resistance to the way it was going by rebelling within the framework of the game were simply punished/beaten time and time again. In the end they tried to step out of the game and return to 'real life' . . . but the game had become real life to the others, to the extent that the mobsters, as they had become, physically restrained the objectors.

This is where a Guardian is needed – or, and here is my subject of study, an inbuilt sense of guardianship that enables players to cross back out of the 'play acting' themselves: a thread laid down along the way that allows each Theseus to escape the maze having met the monster and thereby – importantly for theatre – to live to (and want to) tell the tale.

How does the Guardian (as it might be, Clive) instil the director's ethics and sensibilities of guardianship into the players so that even when unattended they will not be care-less with the work?

Returning to a closer reading of Clive's book, when discussing Transformation exercises he notes that a player may come to a point where s/he 'needs or wants' to return to (as Clive calls it) 'contemporary awareness'. At this point he says, crucially, 'Only harm can come from trying to prolong the work further,' adding that the player should sit out and 'watch respectfully till everyone is finished'. He does not classify Court of the Holy Dido as a Transformation exercise.

The power to transform lies in all drama activities and in the games borrowed from other worlds as tools with which the players may explore not only the human condition, which is their constant subject of study, but also the physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual realms to be both understood and embodied in the actor's presentation of self-other-than-self.

In the manuals of the great teachers there can be an understandable focus on finding the words to explain the way the work *works*, the philosophy and techniques particular to one's own practice. But the self-awareness surrounding how one operates as a director/teacher/trainer is not always as clearly present in these same manuals.

Maybe as my offering to Clive's memory I can continue that excavation. Sadly we were about to do something – Lizbeth Goodman, Clive, and myself: a three-way look at how each of us had developed our practice of theatre games, both Lizbeth and I having been influenced by Clive's teaching at some point in our respective pasts. And Clive had nominated Dublin as the place to do the filming. But Time had other plans . . .

One last memory, which makes me smile every time I think of it. Clive had asked if I would take on some of his work with teachers in Bogata, and they needed a CV from me to take it further. I never sent one. I got a letter from Clive which simply read: 'CP. CV. CB.' I remain honoured that my initials merited equal space to his own!

A POSTSCRIPT: Joan Littlewood, with whom Clive had worked and to whom he often

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referred, recalls what her art teacher, wanting Joan to pursue fine arts, thought of her chosen path towards acting. Joan was fifteen and about to go to RADA to train as an actress.

> I knew what she thought of contemporary theatre. 'The same routine, night after night, sometimes for months.'
>
> 'That's not the kind of theatre I want.'
>
> Sitting on the balcony at night I tried to explain my idea to her. Space, light, and shelter, a place that would change with the seasons, where all knowledge would be available and new discovery made clear. It was a place to play and learn and do what you will. I could not define it philosophically, but its purpose was very clear to me.
>
> I already knew that work was the only solution to life's problems, creative work with some manual labour thrown in. The inborn violence, murderous feelings the hate and aggression which are part of us, even our petty feelings can be transformed by creativity . . . everybody an artist or a scientist . . .
>
> *Joan's Book*, p. 64

That's the theatre Clive espoused: 'a place to play and learn and do what you will'.

As for Lizbeth Goodman . . . she *is* that actor who is 'the most experimental social scientist in the world'. She believes so strongly that the theoretical aspects of practice can be garnered and made available to a wider world than their practitioner-parents that she has created a number of projects which push artists into the world of research and socially accessible 'outputs'. As she recounts in her accompanying piece in this issue, she persuaded Clive to move beyond his scepticism regarding the online world of digital technology in a way which enabled him to see the importance of making his work available to the 'remote' audiences of that world.

She has done the same with me. I too was sceptical about computer junkies and the avatar characters which people the online gaming worlds. I couldn't see how my work in theatre games could find a place out (in) there.

And then there was the Court of the Holy Dido.

It was only when Lizbeth asked me to join her in this tribute to Clive and after I had revisited memories of those terrible moments when a group of people played with one of their own as a cat plays with a mouse, that I found the words to explain what I have been working on all these years. It is how to develop the awareness of workshop leaders (directors, teachers, youth workers, or others) and their capacity for guardianship. With all the groups I direct/teach, peer guardianship and self-guardianship is taken into the way I develop ensemble working practices.

So how does this link to Lizbeth and SMARTlab? Because, like Clive, I wrote a book of theatre games and simply let it loose on the world. I have had excellent feedback over the intervening twenty years: 'How simple and clear the "recipes" are,' 'How useful the ideas about Focus are,' and so on. Until now I have never thought of the many other people who, like those wreaking havoc with the Holy Dido, might be misusing or abusing the games. I never thought of their potential to deter some participants from ever going near a drama workshop again, even while delighting and developing others. I never thought of the readers/players as a remote audience.

Now I do. Now I see the importance of developing materials and resources that will not only develop a person's ability to design and lead a drama workshop, to use theatre games in rehearsal, to contribute to a programme of personal and social development through theatre, but will also develop their understanding and capacity for guardianship. Ironically I can see how this might be easier to do in the interactive world of online gaming and training. Over the past year I have found myself talking strategy with the Professor of Electrical Engineering, not the Professor of Drama.

Meanwhile, this has informed and inspired me to deliver the revised version of the book which the publishers have been chasing for years. I wasn't sure what needed to be added: now I am. Now I relish the opportunity to write clearly about guardianship, to name it and to encourage the many practitioners who use theatre games to develop the practice from there.

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