

INSTITUTIONAL MAGIC

Mere purposive rationality, unaided by such phenomena as art, religion, dream and the like, is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life . . .

Gregory Bateson

Aldo Gennaro

Aldo Gennaro is a drama therapist whose work with institutionalised retarded people is well known, and whose working relationship with the people participating in the Naliandrah Drama Circle is sympathetically examined in Chris Noonan's soon-to-be released film, "Stepping Out".

"Stepping Out" is one of a number of initiatives supported under the Children's Services Program which attempt to change community attitudes to disabled people, particularly children, or which attempt to meet the needs of disabled children and their families for support and relief.

Most of us spend a lot of our time in institutions of one sort or another, but few of us can imagine what it is like to spend an entire lifetime, from the cradle to the grave, in one institution.

While institutions provide security and safety, they also restrict us. They restrict our individuality, our independence, our growth, our means of expression and often our right to make even the simplest of decisions. In any institution where people are going to spend a large part of their lives, it is surely necessary to eliminate as many restrictions and to create as much freedom as possible.

I have been working in a "medical model" institution for intellectually handicapped people and my role has been to stimulate their creativity. I believe that creativity is one of the most important functions of our human makeup. Releasing it gives us the power to grow and extend ourselves beyond the limits that other people set for us.

My consuming interest has been in drama, because of its potential to allow people to discover abilities and talents in themselves which they never knew existed. Also in creative drama, many decisions are made collectively which gives the individual greater self-awareness, a change of attitude about themselves and their social environment through relationships.

Most people who have spent time in confined institutions and live isolated from the rest of society have developed their own language, their own traditions, therefore they have their own culture. So it is very easy to introduce drama as a means of celebration. I found with great excitement the richness of symbolism and imagery which sprung to life, unlocking unrealised emotions and dreams.

In the last three years whilst working with intellectually

handicapped people oriented towards creative therapy we discovered very soon as a group that in a collective process the value of therapy's aims and skills was not a conscious effort but more a growing process.

There were 40 participants in this group, Naliandrah Drama Circle, all of varying ages (18-60) all with different disabilities and different needs. Most of them spend their time working in a sheltered workshop which involves very repetitious unstimulating work.

The drama activities took place one evening a week from 6-9 p.m., which was looked forward to as the most important evening of their week. In the early workshops we spent a lot of time exploring the physical working space, and our social space, developing relationships within the group and with the group as a group. In that time we also used non-verbal communications through mime, touching, sounds and dance. Each workshop ended as a celebration of the different realities explored which always left us with some sort of magical feeling.

After the supportive relationship was built up by the group we came to the second step of the process which was probably one of the more exciting ones. The energy we experienced in the group was enthusiastically channelled into a creative energy. This brought about improvisation and the awakening and discovery of many characters and symbols and the beginning of a theatrical language. At this stage everybody was contributing to the maximum of their ability which made the collective process an equal effort, making us believe that as individuals we have limitations and disabilities but as a group we are complete.

In the third stage we extended ourselves to the presence of the

imaginary audience; eyes looking, faceless, expecting. Then we started using our earliest concepts and symbolism in a metaphoric form creating the bridge between stage and spectator. The introduction of costumes, props, masks, music, make-up, etc. and the theatrical structure brought us to new exciting dimensions which also gave the opportunity for other people such as staff from different departments within the institution, parents, friends, community artists to become involved in the most accelerating part of the process towards the performances. This was an ideal medium of integration.

Looking retrospectively at this singular form of a collective creative process shows us how simple, easy, exciting and magical this kind of event can be to a group of institutionalised people whose lives are normally sheltered and restricted in a structure predominantly controlled by finance and administrative personnel being more beneficial to staff rather than really serving the physical, social and creative needs of the residents.

"Stepping Out", a fifty minute film about Australia's first performance by the Naliandrah Drama Circle, is a visual record of this remarkable event and is a deeply moving statement about the potential of human beings who break through the limitations set for them by others, bringing to a wide audience the magical moments we shared together.