

A soul in the palm of a hand

STROKES and other disabilities can strip away the power of speech and gesture, leading to individual isolation and social disadvantage. Dignity and self-worth plummet.

Disabled older people need activity and independence. How can individual expressive potential be developed in a social context, to re-empower people? With puppets.

How can this marginalised medium, supposedly only for children, motivate adults with disabilities to reach their goals?

Our puppet workshop (12 hours of beginning puppetry, with disability awareness as an educational component) began in 1989 at a disability resource centre (DRC) in Glasgow. Our plan was to have clients working together to reduce individual and social isolation. In 1992, we are still working together.

Group members range in age from the thirties through the seventies. A quarter are from ethnic minorities. Three use wheelchairs. Most have had a stroke.

One member's complex disabilities initially made communication difficult. In his own world, he surfaced seldom. He would endlessly repeat words or phrases, constantly reshape his distorted objects. Puppet play was aggressive, relentless. His self-esteem was negligible.

Validity

We gave validity to his kinetic style, giving him "permission" to be different. He began paying positive attention to himself, taking pride in his efforts, listening constructively, completing tasks. Now the playwright of our current production, he creates stories, puppets and sculpture outside the group, and enjoys sharing what he has learned.

How has the group process worked? Problems initially encountered were low self-confidence, poor concentration, slow psychomotor skills, inhibited self-expression, difficulties in decision-making and poor communication skills.

We began exploring simple puppet-making, adapting construction to various needs, with OT or assistant OT help. We taught sociocultural history of pup-

A puppet workshop enabled a group of disabled people to overcome isolation and regain their self-esteem. Mickey Aronoff describes the creative process.

petry and good and bad puppet practice.

Still, members were not sharing their personal concerns or functioning as a group. We took them to events outside the DRC for stimulation. But early structured attempts to address issues of disability awareness revealed their unpreparedness to actively oppose the myths that old or disabled people are powerless.

How could we work to expand mind and spirit? Making experimental types of puppets and masks without predetermined end-products was freeing. We established a permanent exhibition corner in the DRC, a tangible validation of members' work.

Holistic work brought breakthroughs. As three major body parts affected by stroke are the heart, the head and the hands (also important areas in puppetry), we did an extended project on these areas. We wanted clients to find their own concepts.

First they had to guess the characters of Indonesian shadow puppets. All answers were acceptable, especially as the symbols were out of context. Then they were taught techniques of ideation.

Brainstorming the word "heart", they shouted out such emotive words as *attack, death, disease, oppression, downhearted, love, no love, hear/broken, independence, voice of your own, caring, self-reliance*. The floodgates had opened, personal comments were shared, and members became linked in recognition of common experience and feeling. This was the turning point.

The next session was on hands. After hand massage, everyone's palm was read in fun. We plaster-casted everyone's hands, looked at photos



Malcolm Knight, of the Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre, leads an experimental puppetry session.

of a puppeteer's hands manipulating puppets, and brainstormed "hand".

A long discussion of hand function before and after strokes ensued. We made gold silhouettes of everyone's hands, affixing them to a red sign with the Chinese proverb: *The soul of the puppet is in the palm of the hand.*

The next session dealt with "head". Looking at portraits

of the recipients and, by extension, some confidence and pride in themselves through sharing their creativity.

Many sessions of education, puppet making, and improvisation followed. All this was "grounding" work. Then members wished to know the feeling of performing, but simply. We chose *The Frog Prince*, as we already had the characters (glove puppets) on

had to help a great deal. But we always let members have a go at everything first, to understand how much work went into more complex productions. *Cinderella* was a great success.

But the group was self-critical, more aware of what had not been achieved. Members wanted something original, from story idea to performance. We asked people to bring ideas, and *Arthur the Teapot* was born.

Arthur is a metaphor for redundancy, for feelings that come from falling into disuse. The hero is a sturdy teakettle who is dismayed when replaced by high technology. He ultimately finds happiness and utility serving as a bird feeder in the garden.

The idea had instant appeal, an innately grasped symbolism. The group seized it tenaciously and treated it seriously, devoting much time and attention. They have been working on it for about a year.

Members opted to perform without defined boundaries, and used experimental sets, props and figures. From script to puppets (using kitchen utensils as inspiration), all work has been theirs.

One scene involves Arthur being purchased, and we talked about values, how we regard things as objects, how we make choices. We are always trying to reach the essence, to separate appearance from substance. How we differ, how we celebrate the differences, what we share — all are topics of continuing interest.

How does puppetry work with older disabled people to bring growth? It demands a wide range of skills, stretches the intelligence, and consolidates past experiences. Project work creates the habit of decision-making through informed choice and experimentation. It is while actively sharing creative space that important discussions are started and feelings shared.

The language of puppetry works holistically, synthesising artistic skills in each person whatever their development, reaching all levels of interest and expertise. (In our group, we stress the importance of process over product, while still striving for the highest quality product.) Puppetry improves voice and fine motor skills, concentration and memory. With

learning and reinforcement, critical sensitivity can be developed.

In animation, puppets work as mechanisms for self-projection and for the trying-on of identities. They offer a choice of voice or body language for self-expression, giving the opportunity for sharing within a group. The power of that group voice allows re-entry into society, which can then be reshaped to eliminate the barriers thrown in front of disabled people.

Puppetry disguises. Not linked to work or re-training, it works therapeutically, recreationally and educationally. Because it is perceived as unique, there is less frustration in trying to learn, adapt, or enhance old or new skills. It is non-threatening, so trusting relationships can be formed.

It offers metaphors that people need to build on to reshape themselves.

Positive changes have been lasting because of the gradual, extensive process. To build trust and understanding, we maintained long-term contact and commitment by the continuity of venue and staff and of the workshop leaders.

We feel we reached our aims of promoting an interest in puppetry; promoting craft skills; aiding group interaction, communication, cooperation and trust; increasing self-confidence and physical and cognitive understanding; and stimulating other vocational and educational interests.

One group member, born with cerebral palsy, never felt disabled until his stroke. A fiercely independent man, he has now begun accepting support. Another, who was once as disabled by fears about recurring stroke as by her frozen hands, did suffer another serious stroke — returning to the group, stronger than ever.

At the death of a well-liked member, the group strengthened, filled the gap with their own work and with her memory.

Shortly before she died, she shed her mournful widowhood, opening herself to the possibility of new relationships, and building on the ones she made in the group.

No one has left the group. Through learning and giving, all the members are finding their own strengths. We expect there will be more growth through shared problem-solving.

Not yet into performance, Arthur is already successful in that the group has found new individual and collective pride, progressing from the security of received (other peoples') work to their own material, working up to and through their own metaphors.

As members continue to gain strengths, we can only hope for attainment of the level of awareness they need to help work against society's barriers.

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'Puppetry is non-threatening, so trusting relationships can be formed. It offers metaphors that people need to build on to reshape themselves'

of historical people, we tried guessing their occupations, and talked about prejudging by appearance. We brainstormed "head" and discussed puppet head characterisation, referring to cartoon drawings.

Members talked about the difficulty of being misread (and therefore misunderstood) due to expressions fixed by paralysis. One looked at a cartoon of a worried face, mouth half turned up, half down. She called it "stroke mouth".

To rediscover social joys, we had the group make simple marionettes to give as gifts. The next week brought stories of happiness felt by

hand; we had only to make props and scenery.

We discussed different versions of the story, and members wrote humorous scripts. The show was presented to the DRC staff and clients, to great acclaim. Members wanted to work on another production. We evaluated videos of their *Frog Prince* and of professional performances; they were becoming discerning.

The group decided to perform at Christmas at the DRC, with only four sessions to prepare. They revised *Cinderella* humorously, staging with shadow puppets. The members wanted to concentrate on rehearsing, so we

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