

Explorations: Sesame & Developmental Transformation
An evening with David Read Johnson

By Andrew Royle

It was here, in this room - The Movement Space at Central School of Speech and Drama - that I'd first read of David Read Johnson and his approach to dramatherapy: *Developmental Transformations* (DvT). One thing was writ large on reading his paper *Towards a Poor Drama Therapy* (1996) and that was *Freedom*. Freedom to express instinctively, in the moment, using a form (improvisation) which, in its self-reflectivity, seemed able to break free of its own form - leaving what: a confrontation, a naked encounter, pure being?

As Read Johnson says:

‘we aim [for] a poorness in all but what matters. As explores who have to leave all their equipment behind as they climb the peak, reaching it with nothing on their back only to savour the moment and then return....’

(Read Johnson, 1996)

That was six years ago in 2006. The irony is that it was whilst training in Sesame's ‘non-verbal’ approach that I was struck by Read Johnson's *words*. I was well aware of the potential differences between DvT (direct, confrontational, verbal) with Sesame (oblique, non-confrontational, non-verbal). However, as a budding Jungian, the opposites drew me in.

The year following my Sesame training, I joined the newly formed UK DvT Practice Group. I visited the DvT Training Institute in New York and Read Johnson's own P.T.S.D. clinic in Connecticut, US, where DvT is both taught and practiced. I qualified as a DvT Practitioner (Level 1) in 2011.

So, it was with a sense of *coniunctio* that I was back, sitting on the floor of The Movement Space, in April (2012) at a Sesame Institute research evening (hosted by Mary Smail) with David Read Johnson himself. An evening which was to explore the similarities and differences between Sesame and DvT; also, where myself and John Hazlett Dickinson (both Sesame graduates and members of the UK DvT Advanced Group) were to give a demonstration of a DvT session (gulp!):

Let us first ask, what is DvT:

‘DvT is an arts practice based on the axiom that experience is *nonrepeating*, causing an instability throughout *Being*. DvT aims to *lower our fear* of these instabilities, by *dimensionalizing* experience through the process of *varielation* within a *playspace*. DvT method involves a facilitator and client(s) *spontaneously playing* in each other's *proximal, physical presence* through an *aesthetic, developmental* process in an arts media.’

(Definition provided by David Read Johnson, 2012)

Mary opened the evening, acknowledging David's work and also his long friendship with Sesame founder Marian 'Billy' Lindkvist. We were asked to write one word to represent 'Sesame', one for 'DvT' and one for 'Research'. The words morphed into dramatic sculpts, which developed into a kalidescope of movements and sounds that filled the space – real research 'in the doing':

'Released' 'Integrity' 'Fun' 'Integration' 'Fun'.

Back in a seated circle, David spoke of his early work in psychiatry and of his being designated the 'drama person' long before the days of professional dramatherapists. This was a similar time to Billy's emerging work in the UK. In referring to similarities between Sesame and DvT, David mentioned that both approaches were *non-interpretative* and used the *oblique*. Furthermore, both are *embodied* forms of therapy, pointing towards Laban's influence on Sesame and similarly, in Jerzy Grotowski's Physical Theatre and Marian Chace's Dance Therapy influences on DvT. Both approaches also value the use of *touch*; David drew attention to Billy's *Movement with Touch* work and spoke of DvT's emphasis on touch, which it regards as 'a natural human activity' (Read Johnson, 2010).

David recognised that though the two approaches may have different terms, both were concerned with *depth*; that is to say, whether it be called 'The Unconscious' 'Mit-Sein' (Being-with) or 'Source', both approaches aim to facilitate the clients' descent to a spontaneous, playful and intuitive space. Mary agreed, adding that both allow a space for what cannot be said in the everyday, and in so doing offered a place for *shadow* to be lived.

Reflections on the nature of depth became a theme for the evening: Is depth something that a person attains by oneself (i.e. through self-immersion or introspection)? Both Mary and David thought not. Encounter with another is an essential component of DvT, this is explored further in *Current Approaches in Dramatherapy* (2009) where David writes of Sartre's idea that 'we experience ourselves as an object in the Other's view' (p.92, 2009). Mary agreed that it is only in relation to the other that one becomes aware of one's depth.

In referring to differences in the two approaches David spoke of Sesame's use of myths and stories, arguing that by telling a story to clients, the Sesame therapist brings in a story or text *from outside* the session. In comparison, David regarded the DvT therapist as remaining 'in encounter' with the client, that is, *inside* the session. For David, a text or story, similar to props or costumes (also not used in DvT) gets in the way of the embodied encounter between client and therapist.

However, interestingly, the same archetypes may (and often do) appear in Sesame, as do within a DvT session (i.e....animals, the hero, birth, love, death....etc) the difference is that within DvT the archetypes rise up within encounter, rather than being introduced from an established myth or story – i.e. from outside the session.

Furthermore, whilst reciting a story or myth to a client, the Sesame therapist's role becomes stabilized - as 'storyteller'. Whereas, in DvT, the improvisational play, allows for both the client and therapist roles to remain fluid and therefore open to transformation. In response to a query regarding the amount of 'variation' that is permitted between what is told in a myth and the client enactment, Mary responded that what a client chooses to do with a myth is up to them. Also, that it was usual, when working with the same myth over several sessions, for the client to vary their response and way of working to a myth or story.

Further responses regarding differences within the two approaches that came from workshop attendees included, thinking of Sesame as 'serious' or 'soulful' compared to DvT's sense of scepticism and irreverence, which points towards a wider distinction of Sesame as 'tragic' and DvT 'comic'. Cultural influences were considered as supporting such a distinction, such as the 'British reserve'. In countering this, David spoke of his experiences of British participants in DvT as being very engaged and thoughtful and he pointed towards the strong historical tradition of the absurd in British comedy.

A reflection regarding *pace* within the approaches argued that DvT's improvisatory transformations meant that DvT sessions were typically characterized by a faster pace than Sesame sessions. Therefore, it was felt that the Sesame method (with its bridging-in and out structure) allowed for and accommodated natural pauses. This may help to explain Sesame's more contemplative participation or appreciation for 'the sacred'. David responded that the pace of DvT depends on the client group involved, he referred to his work with senior clients in care-homes and hospitals.

Mary closed the evening in considering Phenomenology (amongst other areas) as a possible meeting point for Sesame and DvT.

Travelling back home on the Metropolitan Line, the images, words, theories and play of the evening streamed through my mind. I recalled the DvT demonstration that I facilitated, this stood out for me.....had it worked? I recalled the sense of immersion in the play of the participants, had I interrupted their processes, in 'bringing the encounter'.....in taking a role myself.....in joining the play?

I recalled my own 'process' on the Sesame course, it had definitely been a descent – but into what? Into a Self, if so, is Self an integer, a whole - one that requires a space (from the therapist) to descend into and return from i.e. a separate me and you? Or, as Heidegger might have it, are we, at depth, more like entangled beings-with-others – therefore, necessitating the therapist's 'encounter/being with' the client. Can Sesame bring something to DvT: a slower pace, the non-verbal, soulful/psychic connections? And could DvT offer Sesame something: the comic, an encountering challenge, a being-with?

As the train pulled into my home station, one thing was clear - there's more to research here....

Read Johnson, D. (1996) *Towards A Poor Drama Therapy*, *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, Vol 23, No.4 pp293 – 306. Elsevier Science, US.

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Read Johnson, D. (2009) *Current Approaches in Drama Therapy* (2nd Edition), Charles C Thomas, Illinois

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