

Prologue

We all have our neurotic conflicts, our little areas of private folly (at least let us hope so); we are all susceptible to psychosomatic breakdown under stress; and we are all capable of creating perverse fantasies as well as dreaming impossible dreams. Each of us harbors in our inner universe a number of “characters,” parts of ourselves that frequently operate in complete contradiction to one another, causing conflict and mental pain to our conscious selves, for we are relatively unacquainted with these hidden players and their roles. Whether we will it or not, our inner characters are constantly seeking a stage on which to play out their tragedies and comedies.

Who writes the scripts? What are the plots about? And where are they performed? ...

These psychic plays may be performed in the theater of our own minds or that of our bodies or may take place in the external world, sometimes using other people’s minds and bodies, or even social institutions, as their stage. We are also capable of shifting our own psychic dramas from one stage to another in times of overwhelming stress. For the *I* is a multifaceted character (McDougall, 3,4¹).

In this book I will be describing some of the psychic theaters I have played in with my patients over my many years of practice. Each story calls many characters into play. I take seriously McDougall’s premise that these psychic plays can and do take place “using other people’s minds and bodies” (4). Neither therapists nor patients are ever sure who they really are; as if there was some solid, unchanging, fully known self impervious to mystery or to sudden dramatic shifts and painful collisions of conflicting emotions.

¹ McDougall, J. (1985). *Theaters of the Mind* New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel.

We don't really know our "selves." Instead, we are forever surprised, pleasantly or unpleasantly as the case may be, by what comes into our heads or out of our mouths. Our bodies contain and expose what we often don't recognize in ourselves. Our unconscious guarantees we are and will be many characters. Maybe though, we can become acquainted with the most disruptive and damaging by listening to their stories as they unfold.

And because I take to heart McDougall's "theaters," I have melded many different voices and allowed many different actors to participate in each story. The themes and dialogue are real, that is, the conversations and interpretations I describe did in fact take place during the "plays" presented. This is not a book of pretence, but it does contain elements of theater and therapy. Distinctions and definitions are made intentionally elusive in order to present the "in-between" psychic spaces of trauma. In each story there are "real" actors, who do exist, but each is hidden among the various roles, as is the case in so much of life, and in order to protect confidentiality.

I have attempted to write in a style that evokes a feeling sense of trauma and therapy, if only as an approximation, and a limited one at best. The stories, reflections, and drawings are meant to describe the unexpected, indeed unpredictable, scenes that are so much a part of the coming together and falling apart aspects of living with trauma of all kinds.

This is a brief book by intent and for that reason may not be satisfying for some readers. I do not explicate my comments, interventions, or revelations using theory. I allow them to stand alone: immediate, raw and within the context of an ever-changing present.

Relational intersubjective psychoanalytic theory serves to guide me, but I place it off stage, there when I need it but not occupying a stage presence that might obscure or distract from the more central psychic plays. Instead, immediacy of experience provides the underlying tenor and subject of this book. This being said, the reader will still notice a few central principles of this theoretical approach. Especially pertinent is the focus on repairing disruptions created in therapeutic relationships. These disruptions may be due to misunderstandings, premature interpretations, ill-considered expressions of thoughts and feelings, or, finally, to the suddenly unleashed, jagged, base power of trauma. Such disruptions can provide considerable information about the trauma suffered but may also create stalemates that devolve into scripts that are hurtful, beside the point, or in some plays close the theater down altogether.

I acknowledge that my approach to treating trauma as described in these pages may seem unorthodox to some, especially if they are therapists or counselors. I curse with one person, put my hand on the forehead to offer comfort to another, and directly, consistently confront yet another over proclaimed feelings of helplessness. I work with each person in a way that I believe will help me enter his or her story as presented to me. If I am right that the experience of trauma is different for each of us, then I also believe the therapist must have the flexibility, courage, and creativity to go beyond what is considered standard practice. Therapy, when successful, is a unique, co-created process between therapist and patient/actor for the purpose of rewriting frozen scripts and healing calluses on both the heart and soul.

Many of the stories in this book, while succinct, can be unsettling and perhaps traumatizing as well. These accounts provide glimpses into trauma, severe trauma, and what I have written may seem extreme to the point of being brutal. I constructed these “trauma plays” not because they are the most shocking. I chose to present these personal holocausts because they are what I see and hear in my practice. I write of the pain and horror my patients suffer to preserve their courageous, if not always successful, attempts to live with the ravages of trauma in some of its many forms. These people and their stories cannot be categorized as rare or freakish and then filed away in some distant corner.

I also draw on dramas that deeply and powerfully pulled me into their scorched reality, sometimes against my will. I have come to believe it is impossible to work with trauma survivors as a psychotherapist without going into emotional spaces that are dreaded, where balance and perspective are illusive and where one may be bloodied along the way. This is not a book for light reading, so my advice is to read one story at a time and then consider your own emotional reactions before moving on. You are likely to be disturbed by what you read, which to me is a sign of a compassionate heart.