

Interview

Theatrum mundi: Conversations with Adrian Lania



Toril Pursell met Adrian Lania, dramatherapist and psychologist, several years ago through their mutual work with ANZATA. Combined are excerpts from two interviews with Adrian, in person and via video call, in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia. These are acts of listening, recording and interpreting a colleague's story, with a personal and professional appreciation for dramatherapy as it has evolved, and Adrian along with it. The dialogue is to a large degree influenced by narrative therapy practices.

Adrian speaks about the dynamism of dramatherapy, relevant early childhood memories, his training in Poland during a time of political and social transformation, and his subsequent move to Sydney. He discusses his current practice with young people in schools and sets the scene for what is currently underway for dramatherapy training in parts of Australia. In conversation, the exchanges between the northern and southern hemisphere are traced as the profession moves in from the wings.

Keywords

Dramatherapy, Poland, Australia, Grotowski, theatre, playspace

Toril Pursell: *Here we are, Adrian, to reflect on dramatherapy, from Poland to Australia. Is there an image or an object that might serve as an introduction to you and your relationship to dramatherapy?*

Adrian Lania: Two images strongly came to mind when I was reflecting on this. The first was a bicycle, and this is about my relationship to the profession of dramatherapy. As on a bike, you learn to ride and you have to balance a lot of things. Quite a bit of this balancing is intuitive. Then comes that moment when you 'click' and you know how to do it, and that's an uplifting moment. Most of the methods I use in dramatherapy are hands-on; that's the kind of person I am. Dramatherapy is experienced.

Like a bike attaining more speed, the field of dramatherapy in Australia is in a transformative space. I've encountered a lot of art therapists

who were pioneers in Australia, for example Annette Coulter, and they empathise because remember what a struggle it was to bring art therapy to Australia. Dramatherapy is in that phase here right now.

Thinking further, the image about dramatherapy changed into the sandpit. I have these vivid memories as a child about this huge sandpit. Believe it or not, I was a bit shy as a child, but I loved playing there. I would collect and hide objects that became treasures, getting lost in playfulness until someone called, usually an adult, for a reality check. A sandpit is quite simple – it's sand with some boundaries. I believe dramatherapy has these core qualities too. It's using basic tools and at the same time it is like a child in the sandpit – you can make anything you want. The possibilities are endless.

TP: Does the sandpit represent the world of the imaginary?

AL: Yes, and that brings me to Grotowski¹ and to how I came to the theatre, using it in a more personal way. Grotowski would probably never call himself a dramatherapist, but his way is called *via negativa* – focused on group processing and stripping back attitudes and social assumptions, then building the actor's characters from there. The sandpit is about minimalism. The playspace in dramatherapy is similar in using the client's imagination and minimum resources. The action starts, then the story is revealed, but within boundaries of the playspace. The sandpit is not the beach because it has these boundaries.

I became involved in theatre in primary school and went to what would be the equivalent of a performing arts high school. It was an extreme experience for a young person and I believe it helped me to develop as a person enormously. I had a lot of encounters with students of Grotowski. He was a very prominent figure in the town I grew up in, Wrocław. He started his 'Theatre of 13 Rows', later called 'Laboratory Theatre' in the 1970s and 1980s. Grotowski brought to theatre, and I believe it was based on his World War Two experience, the realisation that many unnecessary things surrounded theatre. An actor is almost hidden behind all this glamour and decoration. Grotowski started removing these elements and called it 'Poor Theatre'.



Jerzy Grotowski during a talk as part of the 4th International Festival of Open Theatre, Wrocław, October 1973, photo: Aleksander Jałosiński.

At the time Poland was in the midst of communism and quite poor. You had to line up to get a loaf of bread. Most people's lives were about core existence. But it was also about making an art out of it, going beyond. In school I encountered peers who loved drama; they were all about processing, about self-development. That was sometimes quite heavy, but it was a great experience.

TP: In terms of setting the scene, was this the time of the Iron Curtain and later the fall of the Berlin Wall?

AL: Well, it was a very important period, when I started high school, with the fall of communism in 1989 and the first free election in Poland held in June 1990. The Iron Curtain had just dropped. The whole atmosphere was about hoping for a better life and freedom. It was a time when people thought anything was possible, a time of change. And Grotowski was successful because theatre during the communist time was the medium to speak about freedom, and he did it beautifully.

I mean, the transformation was what we were looking to. We then burned our fingers on it because later it became very clear that this stage – the transformation – was very difficult. We see now, for example in the Middle East, how transforming from one system to another can be difficult and even corrupt. It was similar in Poland – transformation brought a lack of stability.

Working with the theatre brought me to decisiveness. Somehow, the process and the self-development were of greater interest than acting, and I decided to study psychology. When I finished psychology, two professors from my university created a program in therapy through arts. It brought all that I'd learned through drama, theatre, and performance forward; I didn't sweep it back somewhere under the carpet, and it combined well with my knowledge of psychology.

David Read Johnston, as a young man in the 1970s, had attended a Grotowski retreat in Poland and brought back to his work in New York a lot of ideas called 'developmental

transformations'. This was a significant link, because when the Iron Curtain fell, Grotowski made connections with the university in New York, and that's how Hania Makowska and Alicja Kuczyńska, my professors from the Institute of Psychology at Wrocław University went to New York. They undertook training with Johnston and together they established the course I took in Poland.

We were very influenced by developmental transformation and by notions of playspace, that's why the idea of sandpit is so relevant for me. A playspace where you improvise and play with images, it's very fluid and also, what we call, *underdistanced*. As a dramatherapist, when you go into playspace, you are a play object for the client. So you take on roles, improvise and you may be very exposed.

TP: *Were you practicing as a psychologist or a dramatherapist in Poland? Do you think they understood and appreciated what it was that you were doing?*

AL: After I finished my psychology degree and I was still doing my post-grad I worked in a factory, at a hardware supplier and even on a boat in Germany. Finally I got a job as a clinical psychologist in a psychiatric hospital. It was a beautiful position. I could practice dramatherapy as much as I wanted. I had full support and I met people there who were very dedicated to their jobs.

They loved the dramatherapy because it worked for clients. Both clients and staff trusted me and the use of dramatherapy. The only difficulty was that this profession was paid the same amount as a factory job. The hope for transformation and peace was a bit of a burden on our shoulders, because we were in such unstable times. There was extremely high unemployment and it was tough. That was a big push for me to make the decision, get the visa and come to Australia. I had already been to Australia and had a connection with Joanna Jaaniste. My first of several visits was in 1998.

TP: *What kind of impression did you have of how dramatherapy was being practised in Australia when you first came?*

AL: I had the impression that dramatherapy was well-established here. I put it to my poor English that I missed the nuances of that message at the time. I had a wonderful experience as a visiting student though. Joanna took me to her work and I did clinical practice with her. It was the period before a lot of the issues around risk management and insurance. I was at Cumberland Hospital and in a community mental health setting in Fairfield. In Poland I worked in a seventeenth-century castle, you can imagine the heaviness of the space.

TP: *How was it transplanting to Sydney?*

AL: I came to Sydney directly from working in mental health services. I was anxious and I remember my professor Hania said to me, "If you knew what is waiting for you, you will never go". That was true. She also said that it was great to be trained as a dramatherapist but useful to have a psychology degree as well. Moving countries is big enough, and seeking out a job while the profession is not yet fully established is challenging. I believe my psychology background was helpful here. My qualifications were recognised and I was granted immediate registration. But this didn't give me entry into the health system. In many interviews I wasn't 'clinical enough' because I wasn't purely trained in CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy]. I was then employed by the Department of Education as a school counsellor in southwestern Sydney.

TP: *Speaking of categories, what for you is the distinction between dramatherapy and psychodrama?*

AL: Well, there are different schools of thought. One school says that dramatherapy is an umbrella for various methods, where you use theatre for therapeutic purposes. The approach, psychodrama, would be a subcategory of dramatherapy. The same might be said for Playback Theatre, non-scripted theatre. But that is only one way of looking at it. A lot of psychodramatherapists would say they are not dramatherapists, and that is fair enough. They have a right to say that and I absolutely respect that.

However, there is a distinction between dramatherapists and psychodramatherapists. The biggest difference has to do with the role of the therapist. In dramatherapy you stand alongside and are more a facilitator, a dramaturg, who inspires self-expression. In psychodrama you are more in the role of director, group leader that analyses the protagonist to bring self-awareness. Think of the therapist as being 'in role' and 'out of role' and the client as being 'in role' and 'out of role'. In psychodrama I am not there as Adrian, I am there as the director, or conductor in Playback. The structure and use of distancing may be other differences between psychodrama and dramatherapy. I think both approaches have more in common than they are different.

I mean, when I spoke with Jonathan Fox, who invented Playback Theatre, he was clear that it was not intended for therapy. Having said this, dramatherapists adopted Playback as a part of dramatherapy. I think there are processes that we cannot stop. Trying to put boundaries around it is a really tricky thing to do. Because people will do what they want to at the end of the day! [Laughing] They do things like that, whether you like it or not! It's the simple act of respect and showing that I am aware. This is not to say that these ways are not therapeutic enough; it's about these methods being on the border. Some people will include them, and some will identify them as distinct.

TP: *Could you give a sense of how dramatherapy works in practice?*

AL: I work with young people and children in a school setting. Dramatherapy helps me to bring fun and play to the therapeutic processes; it becomes more approachable. If I run the group, the students I work with never say, "I'm going to go and do therapy" – they say, "I'm going to do drama", and for each of them, for different reasons, this makes it more accessible, especially in schools for students with particular needs. Coming to the school counsellor is one thing, and coming to drama is another.

For students it becomes a place to learn about leadership, focusing on their strengths

and skills – their capacity. The word 'therapy' can be problematic. Dramatherapy can shift the focus from the problem-saturated story to working on communication skills. When I talk to parents or guardians, they say their son or daughter remembers that they were learning how to be a leader, how to have presence, stand straight and so on. These young people are often victims of bullying, and there can be a lot of focus on victimisation. Who wants to constantly look at their own faults?

TP: *I'd like to ask you about a 'glimmering moment'.² Can you give us an example of what a session might look like?*

AL: I think those glimmering moments have come with victims of severe trauma, when in the playspace they move through roles. This is based on a triangle. There are three major roles: victim/survivor, helper and predator. I work with students with severe trauma on an individual basis. I usually have an interview with the student, explain a lot to them and know a bit about their history beforehand. In a session we typically start with physical actions like walking around the room. I'm waiting for some image or role to emerge from the student or myself, to pick up on the spark for improvisation. I often start a session by asking a student to 'sculpt' me, and then find a point of contact or connection between us, and then we enter into the playspace.

As the dramatherapist I go into a fluid play or improvisational space. The playspace is where we can do what we like, be what we want, as long as we do not harm each other. It is safe. We are always remembering that we are pretending. Very often the students start acting out by pretending to harm me in various ways. I become the play object; we are in a sandpit. Children and young people have not forgotten what play is.

The moment I feel most fulfilled is when a student shifts from the predator role and slowly move towards the helper and then the victim/survivor role; when they can really sink in and process what has happened to them. That moment is the most precious. Dramatherapy is

about building healthy relationships with others and with ourselves.

TP: *What about current dramatherapy training in Australia?*

AL: Right now Joanna Janniste and I are writing a course curriculum for IKON Institute. It will be a graduate diploma in dramatherapy, which we are very excited about. When you think about courses around the world in dramatherapy, they are based on different models. The course we are writing is very much based on developmental psychology. Joanna has done a PhD in dramatherapy and her background is in teaching. Naturally her approach is developmental as well. So I'm thrilled. As I mentioned before, it's like this bicycle and the dramatherapy school is pedaling away. Practicing dramatherapists in Australia have had to be trained overseas, aside from the patch of dramatherapists in Edith Cowan University in Western Australia.

We are hoping that the ANZATA community will welcome dramatherapy graduates from the IKON training, and will remember how it was when they first started. We would really like to hear if people feel dramatherapy training should be provided in Australia. That will help us with the whole accreditation process. Even if it is not an MA yet, I believe there is a way of developing a provisional registration level for dramatherapists to catch up to ANZATA standards and requirements. For me it is not lowering standards at all. It's about providing a pathway rather than blocking the door.

TP: *How can people now access accurate information about what dramatherapy is?*

AL: I think one of the best sources is to find a dramatherapist. It's such a pioneering area. There are books, for example, *Drama as therapy: Theatre as living* (1995) by Phil Jones. There are good sources of information, you might find some on the Dramatherapy Centre website. The North American and British Dramatherapy Associations and their publications are also great sources of information. It's sometimes hard to summarise dramatherapy and capture it in words. It can

be better to attend a workshop because it's so much about embodiment, experiencing and relating to another human being.

TP: *You've returned to Poland recently. Do you see dramatherapy evolving there, having more of a foothold now?*

AL: I do see this, from a theatre point of view. The theatre's function in Poland is very different from what it is in Australia. Actors employed in Polish theatres are on a basic salary. After the transition from the communist state to the more free and capitalist system, that all had to be reviewed. A lot of people from the theatre started searching for other possibilities of utilising theatre. That search became even more intense when Poland joined the European Union and funding became available.

Actors, who are usually clever people, recognised, 'Wow! There all these other ways of using acting instead of just the traditional theatre'... They started centres where the work is about personal growth and change, but there is no formal dramatherapy training per se. In Warsaw we have art therapy training, and it's growing. It's almost on a similar path to Australia; we are hoping there will be dramatherapy there too.

TP: *I asked for a quote relating to dramatherapy. Would you like to share this to finish?*

AL: Well, my quote has almost become a title – *theatrum mundi*,³ living on the stage. The Shakespearean equivalent is "All the world's a stage"⁴ ... And I deliberated about this for a long time and I thought, how banal! I have this book by Wislawa Szymborska, translated by Adam Czerniawski from her collection, *People on a Bridge*. She received a Nobel Literature Prize some years ago; she is a Polish poet who wrote 'Instant living'.

The best people to speak about dramatherapy are the poets [Laughing]. Szymborska describes how things are put to us in instants, and no one gives us time to prepare. Some of her verses talk about the roles we have to play in our lives, the characters that no one really gives us a hint about. I believe

dramatherapy gives people that space where they can prepare for the next day. Here is a passage: [Reading aloud]

*...If only one could practice at least one
Wednesday
repeat a Thursday!
But now Friday's already approaching
with a script I don't know.*

*Is this right? – I ask
(in a rasping voice
since they don't even let me clear my
throat in the wings.)*

And so on, and so on. What I love about dramatherapy is that yes, we all do *theatrum mundi*. We all do instant living. This interview, it's an example of it. All that is happening with dramatherapy is an example of this living on the stage.

I wake up sometimes and I am terrified, "Oh my god, oh my god! Am I the right person? Should I be doing this?!" And again, when I watch my work with these students, I would answer to this fear, "let's practice today, Wednesday, let's repeat your last Thursday, and let's prepare ourselves for the Friday that is coming up". And that's what I believe dramatherapy can do.

Endnotes

1. Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999) was the Polish theatre director, theorist and lecturer in theatre anthropology who took a radical approach to working with actors and sought to reform the performing arts. (<http://www.grotowski.net/en/encyclopedia/grotowski-jerzy>)

2. A variation of 'sparkling moments' from narrative therapist Michael White indicating moments of insight and/or change (Duvall & Young, 2009).

3. Refers to the metaphor of the theatre of the world and has its roots in early European literature.

4. *All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven stages. At first the infant...*
(Shakespeare's *As you like it*, spoken by Jaques in Act II Scene VII: Seven stages of a man's life).

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