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Using Theater to Heal and Grow

Trevor Davis Davis
Kansas State University

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Using theater to **heal and grow**



Singing ninjas, mermaids, monkeys and dragons filled the center stage at a Manhattan, Kan., community arts center. The actors playing the monkeys hooted, hollered and jumped as audience members laughed and cheered during the entertaining performance.

The cast featured 22 actors with developmental disabilities in a play about a troubled island and its inhabitants. In the imaginative script of “High Tide Trouble,” pirates partnered with ninjas to save the island from dragons that wanted to ignite a volcano.

The cast created the original play through improvisation with the help of 15 Kansas State University students under the supervision of Sally Bailey, professor and

director of the drama therapy program at the university. Those with developmental disabilities shined as the stars, singers, dancers and actors.

“They feel very powerless in our society, and being able to work through characters who solve problems and have respect and power, they can begin to develop skills where they could be more independent in life,” Bailey said.

The author of “Barrier-Free Theatre,” Bailey is a leading expert on drama therapy and is a past president of the North American Drama Therapy Association. The Kansas State University drama therapy program is just one of a handful in the country and the only one in the Midwest.

Anybody doing talk therapy can benefit from drama therapy, Bailey said, but drama therapy has been found to benefit some populations because it is interactive and involves movement. Populations include:

- Those with autism, a developmental disorder that affects the brain’s normal development of social and communication skills. About one in 88 children has autism, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Drama therapy allows those with autism to practice the social skills that they may have difficulty developing.
- Children. They may not have the language or developmental skills to





participate in talk therapy, so drama therapy is ideal. “Children understand the world through play, and drama is a form of play,” Bailey said. “You don’t have to talk and can figure things out through movement.”

- Recovering substance abusers, who may be afraid of their emotions after numbing feelings with drugs or alcohol. “When they get sober, they’re scared to death to interact with anybody,” Bailey said, “but drama is a really fun way to learn those social skills that they either didn’t develop in the first place or that they lost.”

- Audience members watching a performance. Those in the audience who have an illness can discover solutions to problems that are acted out by peers. General audience members benefit as well. “We all have the ability to have empathy when we see a performance, and through that empathy we understand what somebody else’s challenges are,” Bailey said. “Not only does a play bring intellectual understanding to the audience, it brings an emotional understanding, so those audience members can interact better with people who are different from them.”
- Prison inmates, Alzheimer’s patients, those with a disability and others.

Kansas State University’s drama therapy concentration is offered to master’s degree students in the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance. Enrollment in the program has doubled in the past five years, Bailey said. Students complete internships in places like schools, prisons, residential treatment facilities and senior housing facilities. Many take necessary courses to become registered drama therapists by the North American Drama Therapy Association.

Bailey and her students are conducting research on how drama therapy can help teach students English in the English language program, and how drama therapy can help patients undergoing chronic hemodialysis.

Bailey was first exposed to drama therapy while working for arts programs

in Washington, D.C. She became a registered drama therapist and worked with recovering drug addicts and those with disabilities. Bailey discovered that psychology and theater are a perfect fit.

“A lot of the things you do as a theater student, such as analyzing characters or analyzing plays when you’re directing, is almost identical to what counselors and social workers do when they first start working with a client, assessing them and creating treatment plans,” she said.

Drama therapy helps people work through issues to find creative solutions, Bailey said.

“Really good therapy is not giving advice to people,” she said. “It’s about facilitating situations in which clients can make discoveries. When clients discover a solution, it becomes part of them and they’ll never forget it.”

By Trevor Davis, Communications and Marketing



Bailey honored for book on making theater accessible

A national theater group recognized Kansas State University researcher Sally Bailey for her efforts to promote barrier-free theater. Bailey, professor and director of the drama therapy program at the university, received the 2011 Distinguished Book Award from the American Alliance for Theatre in Education for her third book, “Barrier-Free Theatre.” In the book, published by Idyll Arbor, Bailey shares her decades of experience and offers ideas, tips and anecdotes about making theater accessible to children and adults with disabilities.

What is drama therapy?

Drama therapy is the intentional use of drama and/or theater processes to achieve therapeutic goals, according to the North American Drama Therapy Association. Participants can tell their stories, set goals, solve problems, express feelings and achieve catharsis.

