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## Using Role Method and Therapeutic Circus Arts with Adults to Create a Meaningful Performance

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Using Role Method and Therapeutic Circus Arts with Adults to Create a Meaningful  
Performance

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

Spring 2021

Sydney Schorr

Mental Health Counseling with a concentration in Drama Therapy

Dr. Laura Wood, PhD, RDT/BCT

### **Abstract**

This capstone thesis explores the ways in which dramatherapeutic techniques, specifically Role Method (RM), can be used in conjunction with the field of Therapeutic Circus Arts (TCA). The literature reviews the topics of the history of circus, social circus, the current research on Therapeutic Circus Arts, and drama therapy with a concentration on the core processes, role theory, and Role Method. A one-time community engagement workshop project was developed based on Role Method and Therapeutic Circus Arts to guide adults with circus experience to create a meaningful performance designed for self-discovery. Results of the workshop are presented through this writer's experience, further exhibited by arts-based research centering on the themes of self-discovery, vulnerability, and active witnessing. This thesis offers a bridging of two emerging fields and alternative uses for the application of Role Method. Further study could benefit from extending the workshop into multiple sessions to promote role exploration and self-growth.

*Keywords:* Drama Therapy, Therapeutic Circus Arts, Role Method, Self-discovery, Performance, Exploration

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## **Using Role Method and Therapeutic Circus Arts with Adults to Create a Meaningful Performance**

Running away to the circus is a common childhood dream. Or, at other times, a threat tactic used by disgruntled children towards their parents. The lights, the colors, the death-defying feats, and the magic inherent in the circus all draw people in. Circus is a purveyor of spectacle (Loring, 2007); however, the word “circus” has many different connotations and is an evocative art form that elicits various thoughts. There are positive connotations such as the joy going to the circus brings, and negative connotations such as when people say, “what a circus!” or “don’t hire that clown!” While the circus can elicit a different response in each of us, this thesis will be focusing on how the circus arts can benefit those who engage with it.

Circus is full of fun, risk, trust, aspiration, hard work, and humor (Bolton, 2004), and can be defined as “...a performing art form which consists of the performance categories aerial acrobatics, clowning, equilibrium, floor acrobatics, object manipulation, and animal acts” (Barlatti, 2020 as cited in van Rens & Heritage, 2021, p. 1). Unlike many physical activities, circus is not based on competition. It is recreational work that allows for self-expression while also providing an effective physical workout. The allure of this modality is it “...is an inclusive, non-competitive, pluralistic and quirky, multi-sided art form in which any individual can become part of the group, no matter their size, shape, or age, as long as they have or develop skills that contribute to the creative potentials of the whole” (Seymour & Wise, 2017, p. 4). The multidisciplinary nature of this art form allows for different interests, bodies, and abilities to be in harmony under one tent. In the circus, you can be whom you want to be (Bolton, 2004).

This thesis looks at the intersection of TCA, Role Theory, and Role Method (RM) and uses these theories to create a community engagement project. Participants will use RM, an eight-step method based on role theory devised by Robert Landy used to invoke a role, characterized as “...a basic unit of personality containing specific qualities that provide uniqueness and coherence to that unit” (Landy, 1993, p. 7) to explore a role while using TCA. First, I will offer readers a brief review of the literature including the history of the circus to showcase the development of the culture and identity of the circus, social circus, the current research on TCA, the core processes of drama therapy, and role theory and method. Furthermore, I will discuss how TCA has developed from social circus, community circus, theatre techniques, circus arts, and clowning. Then I will describe the intervention and results from the one-day community engagement workshop. I will also showcase how these two fields can further be bridged beyond the current association with the use of Role Theory in the methods of TCA, such as using the artist as the epic hero or when creating one’s own clown persona (Bolton, 2004; Carp, 1998; Gordon et al., 2018; Maglio & McKinstry, 2008; Ofir et al., 2015; Pendzik & Raviv, 2011). Finally, I will conclude by examining my experience with the workshop and the future possibilities.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

By nature, the circus is a community of outsiders (Seymour & Wise, 2017). When I was younger, I was one of those kids who dreamt of running away to the circus, and I was lucky enough to be able to do this. Every summer, it was my escape from the pressures of society and other stressors typical for a pre-teen girl. Circus gave me a safe space to be myself. Eventually, doing circus became a summer job and a passion. It became my home, alongside the theatre, another one of my lifelong passions. This paper is a cohesion of these two passions and how to

use them in a therapeutic setting. Since the majority of my experience is as an aerialist, I will be focusing on the use of aerial arts such as trapeze, lyra/hoop, rope/corde de lisse, and silks/tissu when engaging with Therapeutic Circus Arts (TCA). TCA is the psychotherapeutic use of the circus arts as a method of working out one's behaviors, beliefs, feelings, and issues (Schorr et al., 2020). I intend to use circus arts to help people explore their inner selves, deepen their understanding of roles they play in their lives, and discover how they interact with the world.

## **History of Circus**

### **Origins of the Circus**

The Circus Arts have a long, rich history that has survived falls of nations, economic depressions, and other periods of socio-economic changes. The history of the circus is necessary to understand its culture as well as its interdisciplinary nature (Seymour & Wise, 2017). The circus is also full of perceived risk and danger. The high stakes allow for the witnesses to feel a connection to the performer(s) and other audience members (Meyer, 2014). Circus arts have been ever present throughout time and in different cultures. There is evidence of jugglers in the Egyptian pyramids, in artifactual depictions of acrobats and jugglers from both the Stone Age and 10<sup>th</sup> century China, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in animal training, and stories of magic and wonder told through clowns and 'witch doctors' (Bolton, 2004).

What is generally referred to as the circus in Western cultures comes from ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, but the more modern circus arose in 1768 with British Equestrian Phillip Astley (Bolton, 2004; Loring, 2007; Mercadal, 2020). Astley designed an arena in the shape of a circle, or in those days a 'circus' (Bolton, 2004; Mercadel, 2020), now a popular

identifier of the circus- the ring. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, “the necessary licenses had to be obtained under the ‘Disorderly Houses Act’” (Bolton, 2004, p. 182); therefore, the circus was officially established as ‘disorderly’. As circus grew in Europe, people across the pond began to take note and hopped on the bandwagon.

In 1793, the circus made its first appearance in the United States when John Bill Ricketts formed the “combination riding circus” and established the first permanent auditoriums in cities throughout the country (Loring, 2007, p. 2). In 1816, the first elephant appeared in the Nathan Howes Roadshow as a response to the church’s moral objections to the circus, since animal menageries were not subjected to the same form of abhorrence as the freak shows and human performers were (Loring, 2007). Animal acts led to the expansion of circuses, but the Panic of 1837 began to shut down many small circuses. This, however, allowed for the rise of the circus parade, an iconic, spectacular event filled with animals and performers announcing the arrival of the circus, and household names of today such as Phineas Taylor Barnum, the Ringling Brothers, and George Bailey (Loring, 2007; Meyer, 2014). P.T Barnum, the Ringling Brothers, and George Bailey were some of the people who shaped the circus into what we know it to be today. For example, P.T. Barnum originally used the single-ring format of circus, but as his popularity grew so did the stage. He was the first to expand the stage to a three-ring circus in 1881 (Meyer, 2014), which allowed for more to happen at once and the ability to fit more people in the audience.

### **Introducing risk and perceived danger to the ring**

On stage, there were many different types of acts that drew the audience members in, especially those that involved perceived risk as people are generally fascinated by the idea of



cheating death (Meyer, 2014). Originally, acrobatic acts were performed on or near the ground. The first trapeze, invented in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, was a low bar on which acrobats executed skills of strength and agility. In a short amount of time, the height of the bar steadily rose until Jules Leotard popularized the flying trapeze in 1859 (Meyer, 2014). The media then began to advertise the death-defying aspect in lieu of the performer's skill and grace (Meyer, 2014). People were more fascinated by the potential danger than the skill itself. Safety measures were dismissed due to the romanticization of the danger. To this day, there are few government safety regulations specifically regarding circus, and the circus community tends to regulate itself (Meyer, 2014; personal experience).

### **Reshaping the circus**

The knowledge and training needed to attempt such dangerous skills was generally passed through the generations. Many circuses were composed of families and functioned like tribes as they would all travel together and teach each new generation the skills of their trade. Knowledge was often passed down through four to six generations (Bolton, 2004). This allowed for family members to cover for others in case of injury, as the show must go on! Most circus families were formed around the 1830s as this was when the first generation began to take shape (Loring, 2007). Loyalties and traditions are what kept circuses afloat; however, these loyalties were tested during the American Civil War. Some circuses and circus families were able to survive, but the war caused tears in family circuses through divorce, death, and political differences (Loring, 2007). After the war, circus experienced its golden years as larger shows consolidated, culminating in the Ringling Corporation or the American Circus Corporation owning or operating most shows by the 1920s. This is when the iconic Big Top tent first arose

(Loring, 2007), but this was only the beginning of how the circus would continue to transform throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Unfortunately, the Big Top fell as quickly as it was put up.

Throughout the years there were many more ups-and-downs for the circus. “The look of the circus changed dramatically throughout its 200+ year history. Freak shows were completely abandoned, and performing animals were largely phased out. Even the circus parade... was abandoned in the early 1900s because of civic and economic pressures” (Fellows & Freeman 1932; Wilmeth 1982 as cited in Loring, 2007, p. 4). Human rights and animal rights activists were the eventual cause of the end of freakshows and animal acts (Loring, 2007). This hurt the spectacle of the circus and it decreased the awe factor of animals performing tricks and the oddities of human nature. The spectacle aspect began to further decline as the 1929 market crash made grandiosity difficult. Many circuses closed or tried to reorganize, but the constant opening and closing created a disconnect between the performers, the circus, and the audience (Loring, 2007). Solidarity, loyalty, and tradition began to dissolve. The circus was in a state of perpetual chaos, until the early 1960s when circus companies began to go public, ditched the big top, and performed in civic centers (Loring, 2007).

With more access to technology and advances in transportation, the spectacle of the circus became increasingly less spectacular (Loring, 2007). In the 1970s, buskers began to take to the streets doing street performances using skills like juggling, unicycling, and fire breathing (Arrighi, 2014). This all led to a new, more modern form of circus. Modern circus, also known as “cirque nouveau”, emphasized the humanistic and artistic side of circus and left behind the animals, the ring, and the big top (Loring, 2007, p. 8). Cirque nouveau adopts performance

processes, narrative devices, and conceptual frames from the theatre (Seymour & Wise, 2017). Some additional precursors of cirque nouveau are medieval religious theatre, pagan ceremonies, commedia dell'arte, Victorian music hall, traditional circus, Meyerhold's theatre, worker's theatre movements of the 1920s and 30s, the 1960s counterculture, and British and American political theatre troupes of the 1960s (Arrighi, 2014). Companies who adopted this approach, such as Cirque du Soleil, New Pickle Circus, and Circus Oz, began to thrive (Loring, 2007). In 1984, Cirque du Soleil erected their yellow and blue big top, bringing back an iconic symbol of the past (Loring, 2007). While these new companies reminded people of the past and the wonders of the circus, the circus left behind the original tenets that 'you instruct your family and no one else' by opening circus schools for recreation and professional training programs. These schools and programs bring the joy, astonishment, and wonder of traditional circus to the everyday folk, and allow them to experience the possibilities of doing things they never thought possible (Bolton, 2004). Moreover, the modern circus has been able to move internationally as cirque nouveau has freed itself from the confines of language by focusing on story through movement and artistic narratives, such as costumes, lights, and music (Arrighi, 2014; Loring 2007). It is possible that in this new age, new generations of circus families could be forming, and the old ways and traditions of circus families may rise again.

### **Social Circus**

As cirque nouveau was rising as an art form these companies realized that circus could also be used for social change and development. From this idea, social circus was born. Cirque du Soleil introduced their social circus company, Cirque Du Monde in 1995 with the mission to use circus skills "as an intervention for children and youth who are marginalized as a result of

complex social factors, or who are deemed to be ‘at-risk’- that is, at risk of not taking their place in society as contributing adults, at risk of suffering disenfranchisement through low achievement in education, or as a result of mental or physical health challenges” (Arrighi, 2014, pp. 206-207). Cirque du Monde helps at-risk youth learn how to re-enter society (Fournier et al., 2014). The research done on social circus tends to be aimed at children and youth and is geared towards using learned skills to address social issues and general well-being. This is done through educational social interventions combined with circus skills training and socialization games (Heller & Tagliatela, 2018). Social Circus also encompasses circus performances with the goal of educating the audience about a social issue. Circus performers use social archetypes and roles to convey their message, while capturing the audience’s attention with their circus skills (Niederstadt, 2009). The themes in social circus work tend to revolve around the personal and/or the collective. Sometimes, an individual’s stories relate to the story of the collective (Spiegel, 2016), which aims at connection within the group and targets personal growth.

Social Circus has demonstrated many benefits across a variety of populations, such as a decrease in social isolation and psychotic symptoms, and increases in self-esteem, social skills, self-expression, and self-confidence (Fournier et al., 2014; Maglio & McKinstry, 2008; McGrath & Stevens, 2019). It has been reported that the group-centered nature of social circus allows participants to feel as though they are a part of a community and presents participants with the opportunity to interconnect with others who are dissimilar to them (Heller & Tagliatela, 2018). Unlike other physical activities and sports, circus is not competitive but rather focuses on cooperation (Heller & Tagliatela, 2018). In the circus community, there are no rules or expectations to be able to join other than being yourself and using your body to tell stories (Seymour & Wise, 2017). This openness allows for a creative process that is stimulating and

may even bring subconscious material to the surface. Inherent in the name is that social circus is a group-based movement, and it does not work without group cohesion. If the group cohesion and trust is threatened and exclusion is brought in, it is less likely the participants will gain the same personal development benefits from the group (Spiegel, 2016).

### **Therapeutic Circus Arts**

Similar to Social Circus, TCA also focuses on process over product. TCA is a relatively new field in the realm of psychology, hence there is only a small body of knowledge regarding its uses and how to implement it. As aforementioned, TCA can be defined as using different forms of circus to achieve psychotherapeutic goals. Much of the research currently available focuses on different styles of therapeutic clowning, such as clown therapy, clown doctors, and medical clowns. Therapeutic clowning is the use of clowning to meet therapeutic goals (Penzik & Raviv, 2011; see also Ofir et al., 2015), and its many benefits lend support to the efficacy of TCA. While therapeutic clowning is a significant part of TCA, it is outside of the scope of this paper, which will mainly be focusing on the aerial arts in TCA. While there is less research completed in service of the aerial arts, there are some basic descriptions of its uses and benefits.

Aerial arts include, but are not limited to, static trapeze, silks/tissu/fabric, lyra/hoop, sling/hammock, and rope/corde de lisse. When engaging with aerials there is an aspect of risk and perceived danger that is associated with it. The air of lightness and ease that is portrayed to the audience is contradictory to the strength, pain, and discomfort that is experienced by the artist (Meyer, 2014). While aerials can be dangerous and risky, there are ways to practice safely, such as with crash mats, learning proper technique, skill-building, and practicing with a spotter, coach, or partner (Meyer, 2014). Even though progress in aerials tends to be more individual, there is a

community-based feeling that comes along with it. One's classmates, practice partners, or coaches are there for support, encouragement, and to exchange ideas (Rixom, 2012; personal experience).

van Rens & Heritage (2021) found that psychological resilience was a factor in determining levels of mental health, which is more prevalent in circus artists than the general population. They also found that while floor acrobats tended to be the least depressed, stressed, and anxious, aerialists overall have the most resilience and were better able to process the higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. The more one engaged with circus, the less stressed one was (van Rens & Heritage, 2021). Heller & Tagliatela (2018) noticed that participants who engaged with TCA had increased emotional stability, less anxiety, increased social skills, increased teamwork, the ability to follow directions, learned to be a part of a community and help others, and learned physical skills, such as coordination, flexibility, and strength. TCA helped the participants regulate their physical and emotional states. Similarly, Rixom (2012) noted "an improvement in mental wellbeing across a number of dimensions (anxiety, depression, work and social adjustment, and self-esteem)" (p. 153). This study focused on the use of static trapeze on mental health and found that participants had increased self-esteem, empowerment, confidence, inner strength, and self-belief, as well as decreased anxiety. While there was intense physical exertion, pain, and fear, participants then gained a sense of achievement that they took with them into the world (Rixom, 2012). Seymour & Wise (2017) also found that doing circus helps build confidence, opportunities for creative expression, physical strength and coordination, trust, and the ability to locate the body in space. As well, they found it allowed for people to find a place to fit in and make connections, build family support, and share stories. TCA helps build the mind-body connection (Seymour & Wise, 2017). Similar to other researchers, McGrath &

Stevens (2019) found that circus helps relieve stress, build self-esteem and confidence, social skills, and build social supports. They also discuss how improvements in mental and physical health, and investing in such, leads to sustainable economic gains that can benefit society. Using this argument, investing in TCA and other forms of therapy can lead to these positive influences.

Concentrating on the benefits of aerial arts, practicing it allowed individuals a safe way to embody and rehearse risk-taking in a space that is separate from one's personal life (Meyer, 2014). It has been documented as beneficial for teaching willpower and resilience (Meyer, 2014). Aerials require hard work, focus, discipline, motivation, and body awareness. This can provide a mindful practice, in addition to a place to escape from one's worries and negative thoughts (Rixom, 2012). This thesis, while focusing on TCA, also focuses on drama therapy and how it, when combined with TCA, can further elevate the aforementioned societal benefits and aid in self-discovery.

### **Drama Therapy**

According to the North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA), "drama therapy is the intentional use of drama and/or theater processes to achieve therapeutic goals" (2021). In drama therapy, there are varying theories, but all theories share the commonality of the core processes as outlined by Jones (2007) and expanded upon by Mayor and Frydman (2021). Phil Jones (2007) discussed the core processes of drama therapy- dramatic projection, playing, role playing and personification, dramatherapeutic empathy and distancing, active witnessing, embodiment, life-drama connection, and transformation. Mayor & Frydman (2021) expanded upon Jones' work by further defining the core processes and adding one more core

process of the triangular relationship. The following section will focus upon the core processes that seem to be shared by drama therapy and TCA.

### **Core Processes**

When dramatherapeutic work is performed, the participants and facilitator break the boundaries of time, space, and everyday rules by entering a liminal space called the playspace, which is the “creation of an area set apart from, but connected to, the everyday world and which has specific rules and ways of being” (Jones, 2007, p. 93). This can also be referred to as dramatic reality, which is one thing that distinguishes the actions occurring in the space as drama therapy (Armstrong et al., 2016). The dramatic reality acts as a “container and third factor between client and therapist, positioning the drama as a therapeutic space” (Jones, 2016 as cited in Mayor & Frydman, 2021, p. 8) and is also referred to as triangular relationship. Triangular relationship is always present when drama therapy is conjured and supports the client’s creative cathartic process (Mayor & Frydman, 2021). The containment created in the playspace enables an individual to feel comfortable playing with their issues and inner emotional states. One way to express inner emotional states in an external form is through dramatic projection. Dramatic projection is the “...process by which clients project aspects of themselves or their experience into theatrical or dramatic materials or into enactment, and thereby externalize inner conflicts.” (Jones, 2007, p. 84). This can come through in many ways, such as puppets, masks, and creating stories, among others. Whenever an individual creates dramatic content, it is always imbued with their own unconscious content. Dramatic projection creates new depictions of what an individual brings to therapy (Jones, 2007; Mayor & Frydman, 2021). Embodying or assigning a role to someone or something can be a form of dramatic projection as it externalizes one’s emotions.



On the other hand, role playing and personification have their own functions in drama therapy. Role playing and personification comprise an enactment that represents a feeling, issue, person, or part of themselves. These role-play enactments and improvisations can be real or imaginary but are usually taken from life experiences (Jones, 2007). Personification is more often used to bring an inanimate object to life using an aspect or quality of a person. Role playing and personification can help create empathy by allowing the client to immerse themselves in another's experience or their own through dramatic representation, and de-roling can help bring insight to the material that is being worked on (Jones, 2007; Mayor & Frydman, 2021).

Specifically, dramatherapeutic empathy can help an individual find perspective regarding themselves or an issue through identification, emotional resonance, and engaging with feelings within their dramatic work (Jones, 2007; Mayor & Frydman, 2021). At times, feelings can become overwhelming. Contrastingly, they can also feel distant and hard to understand. Distancing allows for different perspectives to be seen when reflecting and applying thought to the dramatic work (Jones, 2007). Material can be overdistanced, which is when it is difficult to engage with the feelings as the mind is saturated with thoughts, or underdistanced, which is when one's emotions are overpowering (Jones, 2007; Landy, 2009). When working with difficult material, being held in a safe space and being seen by another can be significant to one's personal growth. When a healthy balance of cognition and affect are achieved, this is called aesthetic distance (Landy, 2009). In addition to distancing, another core process that provides validation by being seen by another is active witnessing. Active witnessing is "...the act of being an audience to others or to oneself within dramatherapy" (Jones, 2007, p. 101). When the individual looks inward and views themselves as an 'audience', it fosters the ability to engage

with themselves and life events in a new way. The experience of being witnessed allows for the individual to feel validated, acknowledged, and supported (Jones, 2007; Mayor & Frydman, 2021). When a person gains the ability to witness themselves, in addition to others, it becomes an internal experience. It develops the connection with one's internal process, which in turn can also connect one to their physical body. The mind-body connection links together one's internal state with their physical body (Carp, 1998; Jones, 2007).

Another way to develop this connection is through embodiment. Embodiment occurs when the dramatherapeutic material occurs not only in the mind but also in the body. Through the mind-body connection, the individual learns to relate to their body and allows the material to evolve through the body into their conscious actions (Jones, 2007; Mayor & Frydman, 2021). While the material surfaces in the body and integrates into the mind, the individual can integrate what they are working through into their system. Ideally, this would allow the individual to reorganize part of their internal system through transformation, which is the occurrence of when the expressed material is confronted or worked through and the perception or understanding of said material is rearranged. This action alters the way the individual perceives themselves and their relationship with their life in new ways of thinking and being (Jones, 2007). Life-drama connection is what ties it all together. Life-drama connection bridges the therapeutic work done in the dramatic reality/playspace and the real world, resulting in personal change (Jones, 2007; Mayor & Frydman 2021).

### **Role Theory & Role Method**

Building off the core process of role, role theory focuses on the development of a role or multiple roles and their function in forming one's personality and the way one interacts with the

world. This theory was devised by Robert Landy to integrate different schools of thought regarding how humans interact with the world in various roles and relate it to drama therapy (Landy, 2009). It encapsulates the idea of “life as performance” (Landy, 2009, p. 65; see also Ramsden & Landy, 2021, p. 84) and “All the world’s a stage...” (Shakespeare, trans. 2006, 2.7.139; see also Landy, 1993). According to Landy (1993), we, as humans, comprehend and understand our existence through narrative since people are natural storytellers and social beings. He conceived the concept of role theory which examines a person’s ability to take on a role, “a unit of personality, a container of thoughts and feelings, a personality concept, a performed character in theatre, a metaphor for social life, and method of treatment in drama therapy” (Landy, 1993, p. 8) that indicates individuality, and how it forms their identity (Landy, 1993).

Role is the fundamental basis of any story as all stories require a teller and a potential receiver (Landy, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). Role can become a metaphor for and take on qualities of everyday experiences and one’s sociocultural experiences (Landy, 1993, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). The story becomes the container for the teller’s thoughts, feelings, and values (Landy, 1993, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). When different roles interact with each other it becomes a role system and helps to form one’s identity. It consists of primary roles, secondary roles, and tertiary roles. Primary roles are those that are given, mostly through biological means, that eventually are influenced by one’s environment and developmental process, such as ‘the breather’, ‘the eater’, and ‘the sleeper’ (Landy, 1993, p. 33). Secondary roles are those that are taken on and are determined by one’s social life, such as ‘the caretaker’, ‘the perfectionist’, or ‘Mother’. People tend to behave like those they admire and take on those traits, which lead to taking on certain behaviors and therefore roles. Lastly, tertiary roles are those that are played out, consciously chosen, and can be temporary (Landy, 1993). A flexible

role system, meaning moving in and out of roles fluidly, is a sign of a healthy role system. A problem or disconnect with one role, especially a primary role, can negatively influence a person's interactions with their social world, thereby indicating an unhealthy role system (Landy, 1993). Each role has subroles that hold different physical and cognitive qualities of the main role (Landy, 1993, 2009). For example, the role of the mother can be seen as nurturing, but also controlling or manipulative. When an individual takes on a role and allows it to play out in drama therapy it allows them to master it and engage with the thoughts and feelings regarding that role, or ones related to it, by creating aesthetic distance (Landy, 1993, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021).

On the other side of the role is counterrole, which is similar to subroles in that it is “the other sides of the role that may be denied or avoided or ignored in the ongoing attempt to discover effective ways to play a single role” (Landy, 2009, p. 68). The counterrole is not necessarily the opposite or an evil role. Rather, it can be viewed as the antagonist if the role is the protagonist. It is another way to discover qualities about the role, by playing out the opposing force. It also cannot be independent as it is formed from the role, but still has its own identity (Landy, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). The guide role is what bridges the role and the counterrole. The guide role helps with integration and is “a transitional figure that stands between role and counterrole and is used by either one as a bridge to the other” (Landy, 2009, p. 68). This can be another role that is called up or played by the drama therapist. The drama therapist may enact as the guide when the client has difficulty calling up this role themselves (Landy, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021; see also Hannes & Uten, 2017). As the individual delves into the role, their list of roles, counterroles, and guide roles increases. A list of roles and subroles form a role taxonomy (Landy, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). This can be helpful in

consciously calling up a role and all roles in the taxonomy can work as a role, counterrole, and/or guide (Landy, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021).

RM is an applied practice of role theory. RM consists of 8 steps: 1) invoking the role, 2) naming the role, 3) playing out/working through the role, 4) exploring alternative qualities in subroles, 5) reflecting upon the role play, 6) relating the fictional role to everyday life, 7) integrating roles to create a functional system, and 8) social modeling (Landy, 1993, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). Each step of the process guides the individual on a path of self-discovery and deepens the individual's connection to the role and is not necessarily a sequential process (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). Invoking the role is when the individual consciously chooses a role to express or examine. When choosing a role, it is common to simultaneously name that role. Naming the role concretizes the role and brings it into the dramatic reality (Landy, 1993, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). This helps bring the role to life by allowing the therapist and client to refer to the role. To discover the qualities and purpose of the role, it needs to be played out. Playing out/working through the role is when the individual experiments with the role by creating stories or monologues from the role's point of view. It helps the individual get into character and commit to the role (Landy, 1993, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). As the role is explored, it is natural for other roles to emerge. At this point, the subroles will appear. Exploring the alternative qualities in the subroles allows the individual to delve further and work through the paradox of role, ambivalences, and contradictions that arise (Landy, 1993). This is also the step where counterrole and the guide roles can be invoked (Landy, 2009). When it is time to finish playing out or working through a role, the transition needs to be made back to reality.

Steps 5-7 in RM move the individual from dramatic reality to the world at large. Reflection (Step 5) allows the individual to find meaning through the role by discovering distinct qualities, functions, and styles. These qualities can be physical, intellectual, moral, emotional, social, and/or aesthetic (Landy, 1993, 2009). Steps 4 and 5 are also when the client begins to de-role, which is when they take the role from the dramatic reality and bring it into everyday life to reflect upon the work done (Landy, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). After one begins to transition back to reality and reflect upon the role play, they can begin to relate it to their own experience. Relating the fictional role to everyday life (Step 6) brings it back to reality and encourages the individual to look at the role from a new perspective and how the role interacts with others. As this new perspective is gained, the individual begins to assimilate the qualities of the role into their behaviors and thoughts (Landy, 1993, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). Integrating the role (Step 7) teaches the individual to live with role ambivalence and to discover new ways of interacting with themselves and others. This step is when the role system is restructured (Landy, 1993, 2009; Ramsden & Landy, 2021), and the individual begins to heal and grow their sense of self. The last step, social modeling, is when the individual learns to relate the role to their social world and how it affects others (Landy, 1993; Ramsden & Landy, 2021). These last two steps affect how the individual interacts with themselves and the world and allows them to self-actualize.

### **Methods**

This research was designed as a community engagement workshop project that focused on utilizing RM and TCA to tell and explore the story of a role of the participants' choosing showcased by a final performance on their chosen apparatus. The goal of the workshop was to see if the participants were able to engage with self-discovery relative to a role that they

currently play or would like to play in their lives. This method is an appropriate way to examine this goal because it allows the participants to use the mind and body in self-exploration within a safe, contained space. The main techniques utilized were RM, dramatic projection, embodiment, and active witnessing. To keep track of progress, themes, and other information, the writer took notes during the workshop and created an arts-based response by leading themselves through the process and reflecting upon the experience. This experiential took place over the span of 2 hours and was hosted by Esh Circus Arts on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

### **Event Preparation:**

Before searching for a studio, the writer designed the outline for the experiential to be able to present their idea and to guide their research. The experiential was broken down into 3 parts: 1) warm-up and introductions (30 minutes), 2) main activity (60 minutes), and 3) de-rolling/reflection (30 minutes). There were no official breaks, but participants were encouraged to take water or physical breaks when needed. After designing the experiential, this writer began the search for a location. The writer reached out to two local aerial studios in the Greater Boston Area beginning in January 2021 through e-mail. Due to restrictions regarding the COVID-19 health crisis and other unknown factors in this time, many local studios had closed, so there were a limited number of aerial studios in the Greater Boston Area available for collaboration. For this workshop, the writer was able to secure 4 aerial points, a rigging point where the apparatus is located and suspended from the ceiling, in the studio as this was the maximum number of participants allowed due to the COVID-19 studio policies. While the writer was the facilitator of the workshop, an Esh coach was present as a safety supervisor for insurance and liability purposes. To recruit participants, the writer advertised in the Facebook Esh student page, student pages of other local studios, the Greater Boston Circus discord group, and by word of mouth.

The first four participants to answer the ad were chosen for the workshop. Before the workshop began, the facilitator laid out their collection of postcards on the floor and stacked a pile of sheets with the role taxonomy and writing utensils, while the safety advisor rigged the apparatuses. The participants arrived between 2:45pm and 3pm for a 3pm start time.

### **Participants**

At this community engagement project workshop, the four adult participants were all at the intermediate level or above on their chosen aerial apparatus. As this was not formal research, no demographic information was collected. The workshop was designed for this population, so the facilitator could focus on the therapeutic intent and the role work, rather than teaching basic circus skills. The participants were to notify the facilitator of their preferred aerial apparatus when signing up so the safety advisor could create a rigging plan that followed CDC guidelines of social distancing and not using a recently used apparatus. By chance, all four participants were Esh students. None of the participants had experienced drama therapy previously.

### **Intention**

The writer created this workshop intending to expand on the field of TCA with the primary focus being on adults. The goal of the workshop was to provide therapeutic tools to artists for guidance in creating original pieces that tell the story of the role in a meaningful performance. This was achieved using RM, dramatic projection, and interviewing the roles. The therapeutic interviewing focused on what the role wants to say, its relationship to the apparatus, and its desires. The therapeutic intention was to help the participants engage with a role they currently play in their lives to gain catharsis or to play a role in their lives they want to play to discover other possible ways of interacting with their social world. To achieve these goals, the participants first had to be primed for the main activity and self-exploration.



### **Introductions and Warm-up**

The workshop began with a physical warm-up for the body and an imaginal warm-up to stimulate the creative mind. In the floor warm-up portion, each member introduced themselves using a postcard, and then warmed up the body and imagination on their apparatus of choice. The floor warm-up consisted of typical physical warm-up activities for aerial arts such as push-ups, jumping jacks, and shoulder circles with the addition of embodiment and play techniques such as moving through a substance or embodying an emotion. This was utilized to assist the participants in invoking play, trust, and leave judgment outside the space (Gordon et al., 2018). One movement, in particular, was designed as a spectrogram, a sociodramatic technique that measures peoples' feelings and opinions on a continuum usually using an imaginary line where people place themselves along it to represent where they fall (Sternberg & Garcia, 2009), to support the facilitator in gauging the participants' viewpoint on what their level of circus experience was to understand where they were mentally and/or physically for exploration and safety purposes.

When introducing the self, the participant stated their name, pronouns, and why they chose their selected postcard. The postcard was used as a projective tool to showcase an aspect of themselves to create a feeling of familiarity, so the participants would feel comfortable sharing within the space and for the facilitator to know more about the participants (Jones, 2007). The use of postcards was intended to help spark imagination and conversation as it was important to create a safe, trusting space and feeling of containment to be able to enter the dramatic reality (Jones, 2007; Mayor & Frydman, 2021) and for the experiential to function in a therapeutic manner.

Once the participants were able to take a short physical break and become acquainted, they were then instructed to warm-up on their apparatuses. This included movements such as shoulder shrugs, knee hangs, knee lifts while hanging from their apparatus, and other individualized exercises. Next, the facilitator instructed the participants to move up and down their apparatus first as if it was sticky, then as if it was forbidden. The purpose of doing the exercises in this manner was to introduce new qualities of movement to exercises the participants are otherwise comfortable with. This new movement style brings forth spontaneity, humor, and increases the flow of energy while showcasing individuality (Carp, 1998; Gordon et al., 2018).

### **Main activity**

Once the participants were sufficiently primed, they were able to begin engaging with the role work. For this workshop, the main steps of RM that were followed were steps 1-3 and 5-6 of RM: invoking the role, naming the role, playing out/working through the role, reflecting, and relating the role (Landy, 1993). To invoke and name the role, the facilitator handed out sheets with a list of 26 roles and had each participant pick one role from the list or create their own. The roles were chosen from Landy's taxonomy with the intention of introducing duality with roles that could be easily identified with or understood. The participants were asked to write down five qualities of their chosen role, as a guideline, then created a sequence on their apparatus to introduce their role to the group. It was not required to use all the qualities but recommended to use what they found to be true to the role. After a few minutes, each participant introduced the name of the role and showed the group their sequence. Here, the participants were able to embody the role and begin playing it out, while the group acted as active witnesses (Landy, 1993; see also Jones, 2007). The participants took on the role of active witness multiple times throughout the session whenever they viewed other's work by holding space for them. One at a

time, the facilitator then interviewed each participant (in their role) to further explore the role and encourage their introspection. Due to this, the facilitator took on the role of ‘the interviewer’.

The participants then continued to explore and play out the role on their apparatus. After each participant was interviewed, the facilitator consistently communicated with them to heighten their percipience, monitor their progress, offer support, and discuss what they were discovering.

### **De-roling and Reflection**

For the last twenty minutes of the experiential, the focus was on sharing the pieces, reflecting, and relating the role to one’s life. This portion of the experiential was specifically focused on steps 5-7 of RM (Landy, 1993). One at a time, the group members restated the name of their role and showed the piece they had been working on to tell the story of their role and what their role wanted to say. After each performance, the facilitator asked the group members if there was anything they wanted to say or ask of the role. Then the performer was able to share their experience and chose how they wanted to derole, such as through reflection, wiping off the role, or simply taking a bow (Emunah, 1994, 2020; Landy, 2009). The group then applauded the performer, providing validation from the role of active witness (Jones, 2007; see also Emunah, 2020), and welcoming the participant back into the space. The last two minutes were saved for anything the participants desired to share about the experience from their perspective. After a final round of applause for everyone, the group concluded.

### **Tracking**

During the experiential, the writer kept journal notes tracking their own reflections of the experience and their observations. After the workshop, this writer created an art-based reaction piece to reflect their own experience, their perceptions of the participants’ journeys, and their observations throughout the experiential.

**Results**

For confidentiality purposes, the participants will henceforth be referred to as the names of their four roles or a number. Each participant chose a different role to play with. ‘The healer’ (participant 1) was on a lyra/hoop, which is a metal circular ring suspended in the air. ‘The believer’ (participant 2) was on the silks/fabric/tissu, which are two lengths of fabric suspended from one point. ‘The lover’ (participant 3) was on a rope/corde de lisse, a vertical hanging rope usually covered in canvas. Participant 4, ‘the warrior’, was on a trapezu, a trapeze bar where the ropes are replaced by tissu/silks fabrics and continue to hang past the bar. The results of this workshop are conveyed through what this writer saw, their own internal experience, and gleaned from things the participants stated to the group or the writer individually.

Table 1.

*Themes and Identifying Movements Identified by Participant Number, Role, and Apparatus*

| Participant # | Role     | Apparatus           | Identifying movement | Themes  |
|---------------|----------|---------------------|----------------------|---|
| 1             | Healer   | Lyra/hoop           | Stag                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• healing of self and others</li> <li>• balance in the chaos of the cruel world</li> </ul> |
| 2             | Believer | Silks/Fabric/tissu  | French climb         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stability in chaos</li> <li>• letting go of control</li> </ul>                           |
| 3             | Lover    | Rope/Corde de lisse | Ball pose            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘what is love?’</li> <li>• Safety</li> </ul>   |
| 4             | Warrior  | Trapezu             | Standing tall        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mastery over opponent</li> <li>• following orders from an omnipresent source</li> </ul>  |

Participant 1, 'the healer', expressed the message of learning to balance the healing of self as well as others. In discussion, they articulated the desire to learn to focus more on self-healing, as opposed to focusing predominantly on healing others. Additionally, they verbalized the hope to explore the sentiment that their apparatus could represent the chaos of the cruel world. The piece told the story of their difficulty discovering this balance amidst the chaos of the cruel world (which was divulged verbally later). Group members, as well as this writer, noticed a pattern of using a stag shape, in which both legs are bent on either side of the body, throughout their performance. When asked, participant 1 noted this was not intentional, but then realized the shape represented balance.

Participant 2, 'the believer', brought in themes to represent the achievement of finding stability in chaos. Their movement quality mirrored climbing a mountain. They verbalized working with a movement that was relatively simple for them, in order to evoke a feeling of ease. The movement, known as a french climb, is a basic movement in vertical aerials wherein one leg wraps around the fabric and the other foot lays on top of the wrapped foot to keep tension. As the workshop progressed, participant 2 added deeper movement quality and expression to this move and explored some of the different shapes the french climb had to offer. From this writer's perspective, participant 2 noted they normally preferred feeling in control of their life but wanted to explore the feelings of letting go of control and being unconstrained.

The participant who chose 'the lover', participant 3, role did so because it was a role they did not currently identify with. They explored the notion 'what is love?' and what was the relationship they had with their rope. The rope took on the role of and personified 'the lovee'. participant 3 expressed motions of openness at times, but often returned to a ball shape pose

where they curled their body around the rope. In opposition, participant 4, 'the warrior', took on poses of standing tall and elongated, strong movements. They told the story of mastery over their opponent and following orders from an omnipotent source. They used the silk portion of the trapezu as the weapon, and the rigid bar was the opponent they were attempting to conquer.

The writer found similarities in all four stories. There were specific similarities in the stories between 'the believer' and 'the healer', as well as between 'the lover' and 'the warrior'. Some common themes that emerged throughout the workshop were vulnerability, strength in healing, and safety. In addition, all the participants chose a role they stated they currently did not play in life or was antithetic to their normal disposition. One participant expressed a sentiment along the lines of 'what is the fun in exploring something you already are?'.

The participants noted that as they felt more vulnerable, they also felt more discomfort. The invitation of discomfort and discovery was an unexpected development, yet a welcomed one. As noted in the closure, the participants felt discomfort with their vulnerability, yet felt safe enough and warmed-up enough to be able to indulge in the experience. Specifically, with the theme of vulnerability, it manifested as trust and blind faith in the stories of the roles as evidenced through statements made during the discussion section and interview process, and movements made of trusting one's body and the apparatus. Similarly, the participants had trust and faith in this writer leading them through their role exploration. Another theme that emerged in each piece was 'strength in healing'. While it was the clear focus of participant 1's piece, the other participants also exhibited this theme either physically in their performance or verbally during the interview about their role.

As mentioned above, the participants discussed how the embodied play techniques that were woven into the warm-up helped them feel comfortable in the space and to be silly in front

of the group. While there was discomfort, especially with exploring emotions, they slowly opened up and noted it was easier to be more vulnerable as time went on. When interviewing the participants, this writer found it important to remind them that the goal was more about the process than the product. Furthermore, the participants noted that when the facilitator continued to ask them questions regarding the role that it was helpful and helped them think.

### **Arts-Based Research**

In response to the community engagement workshop, this writer created an arts-based reaction using a similar format to the one used in the workshop. For this art-based response, they chose to use a dance trapeze, which is a metal bar connected to 2 ropes that meet at a single point at the top. The act was created in 1-hour and was based on the role of ‘the interviewer’. This piece was created as a response to the emotions that arose in the workshop as well as an interpretation of the participant’s roles. In the same way that the participants experienced their role discovery, this writer began with five qualities that changed and expanded as they explored the role with their apparatus. This writer, too, had to remind themselves about ‘process over product’, as they did with the participants. Once the hour was over, this art-based response was filmed on a cell phone. The video can be found here: [https://youtu.be/OxG2-oc\\_hq4](https://youtu.be/OxG2-oc_hq4) .

### **Discussion**

This community engagement workshop was designed to foster self-discovery using RM, specifically focusing on steps 1- 7, and TCA to create a meaningful therapeutic performance with adults. The purpose of this creative process was so that the participant can work through conscious and/or unconscious material (Bolton, 2004; Gordon et al., 2018, Spiegel, 2016;). Even though their stories were non-verbal, putting the story of a chosen role into narrative form allows the participants to view it from a different perspective and explore it in various phases (Gordon

et al., 2018; Pendzik & Raviv, 2011). In this case, RM served as a guideline in the creative, therapeutic process. The use of the apparatus in TCA acts as a device to externalize the content (Meyer, 2014). “Feelings, states and passions are expressed through gestures, attitudes, and movements” (Meyer, 2014, p. 26). As such, these expressions can be perceived as their own form of embodied language which conveys personal expression. An artist’s movements convey the character’s thoughts, actions, and motivations through physical and visual representations to create stories and tell messages (Meyer, 2014; Niederstadt, 2016). Because the participant’s sequences were imbued with personal content and risk-taking, they told a story rather than being created simply for aesthetic purposes (Meyer, 2014). This writer’s reaction piece was about their role of ‘the interviewer’. As this writer explored their 5 original qualities of the role on the dance trapeze, the qualities transformed and became more elaborate. The reaction piece focuses on ‘the interviewer’s’ viewpoint of and relationship with the participants’ roles, as well as showcasing the qualities of inquisitiveness, looking at things from different angles, gaining the ability to ask tough questions, gaining comfort as the session went on, and searching for questions and answers that were ‘accurate’ to the participant’s experience.

For this research, the participants already had knowledge and skills from prior aerial training, which facilitated their abilities to safely improvise and explore their roles through movement while following the RM guidelines. As previously mentioned, all the participants chose a role that contrasted with how they usually view themselves. The choice of a role that is not in one’s usual taxonomy may be an artistic choice fostered by both prior circus performance experience, and by possible previous experience with character development designed for the stage. Like social circus, the content and process of what occurred in the space were more important than the product, as the goal was to help the participants express their goals and



identities, and create connections (Spiegel, 2016). These connections foster a supportive environment, which aids in the development of feelings of achievement, social skills, and personal growth (Maglio & McKinstry, 2008; Rixom, 2012; Seymour & Wise, 2017).

An important factor of the workshop was the facilitator, as their role was to guide the participants through their role exploration. The facilitator helped create a supportive environment where the participants could create, learn, and become equipped with life skills (Spiegel, 2016). Like a circus coach, a drama therapist is there to support and guide their participants in their exploration and self-design (Bolton, 2004; Hannes & Uten, 2017; McGrath & Stevens, 2019). In addition to the other participants, the drama therapist acts as an active witness. This elevates the feelings of validation, acknowledgment, and support for the participants. Furthermore, the therapist's job is to create a safe space imbued with trust to bring about personal growth and change (Hannes, & Uten, 2017; Heller & Tagliatela, 2018). Bridging drama therapy with aerial arts, especially for performers, creates a unique opportunity to provide therapeutic tools and a safe space for artists to support their performance skills.

The results of this workshop preliminarily support the literature review and the use of drama therapy as a tool with TCA. The literature points to benefits of TCA such as increased resilience (Meyer, 2014; van Rens & Heritage, 2021), emotional stability (Heller & Tagliatela, 2018), social skills (Heller & Tagliatela, 2018; Maglio & McKinstry, 2008; McGrath & Stevens, 2019; Rixom, 2012), feelings of community (Heller & Tagliatela, 2018; Maglio & McKinstry, 2008; Seymour & Wise, 2017), physical skills (Heller & Tagliatela, 2018; McGrath & Stevens, 2019; Seymour & Wise, 2017), self-esteem and self-belief (McGrath & Stevens, 2017; Rixom, 2012; Seymour & Wise, 2017), empowerment (Maglio & McKinstry, 2008; McGrath & Stevens, 2019; Rixom, 2012; Seymour & Wise, 2017), and creative expression

(Seymour & Wise, 2017). As well, there were decreases in depression (Rixom, 2012; van Rens & Heritage, 2021), anxiety (Heller & Tagliatela, 2018; Rixom, 2012; van Rens & Heritage, 2021), and stress (McGrath & Stevens, 2019; van Rens & Heritage, 2021). Through observation and reflection, this writer found that with the support of dramatherapeutic tools, self-growth, creative expression, feelings of community, and emotional stability were likely elicited as a result of the workshop. By the end, the participants appeared less stressed and anxious than at the outset, based on the writer noticing posture differences over the course of the workshop and the increased willingness to self-disclose.

To establish a better understanding of the field of TCA and how to combine it with drama therapeutic techniques, more formal research should be conducted. This writer hopes that this capstone thesis can be used as a starting point in bridging and expanding the fields, as well as showcasing alternative uses for RM. One option to expand on this research would be to extend the length of the program into multiple sessions, which could allow participants/roles to further connect as well as to have the opportunity to explore subroles and counterroles to study role exploration, feelings of community, self-growth, and/or creative expression. The primary barriers to accomplishing this in the workshop were COVID-19 social distancing restrictions and constraints on time. Another future approach would be to conduct the workshop with beginners and teach circus skills while working on role exploration through movement qualities. This experience has taught this writer about the power of creating a safe space to promote vulnerability and self-expression, the power of being a witness, and leading others and themselves in self-discovery.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

Lesley University  
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences  
Expressive Therapies Division  
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Drama Therapy, MA

**Student's Name:** Sydney Schorr

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** Using Role Method and Therapeutic Circus Arts with Adults to Create a Meaningful Performance

**Date of Graduation:** May 22, 2021

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:**  Laura L. Wood, PhD, RDT/BCT  
**E-Signature** 4/27/2021 10:48pm EST