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Psychoanalysis and Education Conference

Primitive Space: Psychotic Anxieties

Alpha and beta: how to be both

(With apologies to my friend Ali Smith, whose wonderful novel has little to do with this presentation but the title of which I cheerfully stole from her to try to make sense of something in my thinking. I think I'd change the title now into something such as Self-reflexive Alpha Function in Creative Action.)

First a quick introduction to give a little context – my interest in performance and creativity stems from the 20 years I spent as a performer, writer and director in theatre before moving into the academic investigation and teaching of performance related material, first at the University of Salford and currently in the Drama Division at the University of Huddersfield. I am in my third year of training as a psychotherapist on the Inter-cultural Psychodynamic Psychotherapy course at the Northern School of Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy. I still perform from time to time and alongside that my main creative practice at the moment is songwriting. So, some of what follows is an attempt to understand my own attempts to catalyse and tolerate my own creative action, and then how best to go on to enable students to do the same.

I want to spend a little time considering creativity, thinking about its process and action in relation to the individual artist and her or his internal reality, both conscious and unconscious. Perhaps it is useful to think of creative action rather than the more ephemeral notion of creativity, to think about what processes are

in operation in the active process of making something happen, bringing something into existence in the material world, conjured from both conscious and unconscious sources.

I am interested particularly in those artists involved in performance. Performance can involve a high degree of improvisation, the relevance of which I will come to later. I am using the term artist to mean anyone involved in the process of creation of material for cultural purposes, to be experienced by an audience immediately or eventually. The innovative Polish theatre director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski suggests that 'theatre cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion' (Grotowski 2002 p.19)

So, I consider performers, this group of people who include actors, dancers, performance artists, live artists, musicians, all as being involved in an artistic activity when they are being asked to make performance material. I would also suggest that they are involved with crafting this material as and when it emerges.

In order to concentrate on the particularity of the creative process or what I am calling the creative action I am going to focus on improvised performance in the realm of theatre making. Improvisation in performance takes on many forms and has many uses, both to create cultural material and for therapeutic purposes.

There are many theatre makers and others who have worked with and written about improvisation: Rumanian-born Psychiatrist Jacob Levy Moreno, the founder of the concept of psychodrama in the 1920s, whose 'point of departure is

Freudian psychoanalysis' (Balme 2008, p.183); Viola Spolin, who published *Improvisation for the Theatre* in the 1960s and who describes improvisation as 'openness of contact with the environment and each other and willingness to play' (Spolin 1999, p.25) ; Augusto Boal whose 1970s book *Theatre of the Oppressed* introduced the technique of Invisible Theatre, which asks performers to rely on improvisational techniques; Keith Johnstone, whose seminal book *Impro*, first published in 1979, offers both exercises to develop improvisational spontaneity and his philosophy of performance, which has links with psychoanalytical ideas concerning the understanding of defences that lead to the repression of anxiety-producing material.

All these theatre-related practitioners talk about the making of material in the moment, the spontaneous act of creation, in a continuous time frame. It is for this reason that I choose improvised practice as the subject for discussion and investigation, those moments when there is little time for the artists to analyse and consider the generated material – they have to generate and shape in almost the same instant. I am interested in the conditions and processes undertaken in these moments when the stakes are high because a process of creative action has to be maintained – the creative process happens in a long continuous moment. Much has been written by psychoanalysts about the nature of artistic practice, aesthetics and creativity: Donald Winnicott, Hanna Segal, Donald Meltzer, Gregorio Kohon to name a few and there are two collections of essays/articles edited by Gabriela Goldstein and Sandra Gosso called *Art in Psychoanalysis* and *Psychoanalysis and Art* respectively. Most of these writers concentrate on a wider

timeframe, giving insightful clinical examples of artists and their trials and tribulations, or supplying an analysis of aesthetic objects such as performances, novels, poems, or looking at creative practice of artists over time; but I want to try to understand the process of creativity through an analysis of the actual moments of creative action – hence the focus on improvised performance as a useful form through which to try to understand the creative act.

For this paper I am going to use the term performer rather than actor or dancer or musician or artist. I am going to concentrate on the act of spontaneous performance-making in the pre-public performance stages of making a piece theatre, or in the act of truly improvised public performance, where this is no fixing or making of material before its spontaneous generation in performance. So, I am concentrating wholly on improvisation in the situation of the spontaneous making of performance material.

Many types of theatre and other performance making, particularly those where an existing dramatic text does not supply the scaffolding or blueprint for the final performance, have a period of exploration prior to the fixing of a final performance text. This might be thought of as a pre-rehearsal period. The term rehearsal often suggests the repetition and crafting of pre-existing material, which is why I am making this distinction. In this pre-rehearsal period of work the performers may be called upon to improvise actions, character behaviours, sequences of events, conjuring them on the spot in the real time of the unfolding

action. They may be given contexts for these improvisations: the acrimonious parting of two former lovers; the private grief of an individual encountering a loss; the surprise visit of an estranged child. Or they might be asked to simply generate narrative with no more context than a desire to communicate something to another person or an audience.

In the sphere of improvised public performance, two colleagues of mine, Dr. Hilary Elliott and John Britton, who have trained as improvisers with such luminaries of the field as Al Wunder and Andrew Morrish, curated a long series of completely spontaneous performance events in which they would improvise both together and singly, in front of a paying audience, with no prior knowledge of what they might do. This public performance improvisation makes the same demands on the performer as those in the improvised pre-rehearsal period; the stakes are arguably higher, given that the only context they have is a reaction to the fact of having to generate spontaneous material in front of an audience, without dropping out of the performance frame, but the process of generation of material is very similar.

Our performer's generation and forming of material can be seen to have two important stages, or to align more closely with Kleinian metapsychology, two important positions, which I suggest have affinity with her description of aspects of infant development, the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions, which I'll briefly put into context later, although I guess in this environment it might not

be necessary as most of you probably are more familiar than I with Melanie Klein's work.

The first position in the creative action of improvisation is the accessing of the raw material. This requires our performer to have access to her unconscious phantasies and as Hanna Segal suggests 'The deeper the layers of the mind which can thus be mobilized, the richer, denser, and more flexible is imagination.' (Segal 1991, p104). Access to unconscious phantasy and the potentially disturbing thoughts and feelings aroused by the attempt of the unconscious wishes to become manifest is important as a catalyst for raw thought and feeling. This primitive material of creation is analogous with what Segal speaks of in relation to Bion's description of 'the first primitive stages of development' when the 'infant is filled with raw perceptions, objects and emotions' (Segal 1991, p.50), which Bion names 'beta-elements' (Bion 1984, p.6) and which the infant feels need to be evacuated.

The second position in the creative action of improvisation is a coming to terms with, or the metabolising of the material generated, which is an almost instantaneous act. Our performer has a series of thoughts or feelings in response to conscious and unconscious stimuli, which she then has to sift, consider, metabolise and transform into a knowable performative action, be that speech, movement or combinations of both. It is akin to a type of Freudian dreamwork, the transformation of raw instinct and wishes into a modified form that is

acceptable to the censoring part of the mind provided by the context of the performance or pre-rehearsal situation. In Kleinian terms this modification is possible when a movement from paranoid-schizoid functioning to the depressive position has taken place, or in Bion's terms when 'alpha-function' (Ibid) can operate to metabolise beta elements into alpha elements, which as Segal suggests can 'lend themselves to...understanding, symbolization, and further development (Segal 1991, p.51)

So, from moment to moment in the creative action of improvisation I am suggesting that there is an oscillation between the evacuation of raw material into the performer's conscious psyche and the modification of this material for immediate use in the building of a narrative of performance. I suggest that this process can be understood through Klein's understanding and description of the processes at work in what she formulated as the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, Segal's succeeding understanding of symbol formation and Bion's development of Klein's notion of projective identification, in his description of beta and alpha elements and alpha function and the concept of the container and the contained (Bion 1984, p.90).

I will briefly trace the journey from Klein's development of the term 'projective identification' (Klein 1997, p.8), to Segal's identification of the distinction between symbolic equation and true symbolism, leading to Bion's distinction between normal and psychotic projective identification and the development of

the concept of the container and the contained. Klein suggests that from the beginning of life an infant has a primitive ego and is object-related, albeit initially to part-objects. She also maintains the view that unconscious phantasy, the activity of which belongs to the ego, is active from the start of life and that it is the direct expression of instincts and impulses, as well as primitive defences. The paranoid-schizoid position is a term that refers to all the internal and external object relations, anxieties and defences that are a feature of early infant life in the first two to three months. For the purposes of this investigation it is enough to concentrate on the process of splitting and projective identification that occur in order for the infant to successfully develop, protect and strengthen its nascent ego. All that the infant feels to be bad, anxiety and destructive impulses, are split off and projected into the first external object the infant encounters, the mother's breast. Klein relates this to the deflection of the death instinct (Klein 1997, p.5). As Klein suggests,

The need to master persecutory anxiety gives impetus to splitting the breast...externally and internally, into a helpful and loved and, on the other hand, a frightening and hated object. (Klein, 1997, p. 238)

Defensive actions of denial and omnipotence allow the bad to be kept at bay, while the goodness that the infant has projected, and which seem manifest in the good breast will be re-introjected to strengthen the life affirming aspects of the young ego. This process of projection and introjection is necessary for development and ego strengthening.

In successful development, after the part-object related first three months of life, over the next three months Klein describes a shift in the infant's development and position, to a more whole object-related experience, the onset of what she terms the depressive position. Neville Symington offers a useful image to visualize this: that of an infant putting parts of the jigsaw pieces of her mother's body parts together, so that a whole picture of the mother is formed (Symington, 1986, p. 265). If the paranoid-schizoid position is marked by projective identification, aggressive, sadistic impulses and overwhelming persecutory anxiety, with the need to keep good and bad as separate entities, the depressive position marks a turn towards love and concern, albeit still accompanied by an additional set of anxieties. The developmental achievement can be thought of as a desire 'to protect, repair and securely establish the good internal object' (Spillius *et al*, 2011, p.87) and this is in part possible because of the physical maturation of the infant's mental capacity (Roth, 2005, p.52). As the jigsaw is put together the baby realises that the mother is a whole separate being, and that she is capable of loving but also of ignoring the infant or not always being available and present whenever the infant wants her to be. With this realisation comes the potential to understand that this person, who is the source of love and warmth and the cause of pleasurable feelings is also the cause of frustration and hatred. She is not a separate bad breast and good breast but a whole person who embodies all the characteristics associated with the two part-object relationships that the baby has previously experienced. Added to that is the sudden knowledge that this person has also been the recipient of all of all her sadistic hatred and venom. The positive result of this understanding is the development of guilt and

remorse and the infant's desire to repair, through love, what is felt to have been attacked.

With less excessive use of projective identification the infant comes to experience objects as separate from herself. Segal takes this insight into her thinking about symbol formation; she suggests that symbolic equation, the idea that the symbol is thought to be the original object not a substitute for it, is an aspect of paranoid-schizoid functioning. Excessive projective identification leads to or results from a phantasy that the external object is in the subject's possession. As Segal says,

The symbolic equation is used to deny the absence of the ideal object...The symbol proper...is felt to represent the object...The symbol is used not to deny but to overcome loss.' (Segal 1986, p.57)

True symbolic representation requires the ability to be able to bear loss and separateness, and hence an understanding that the symbol is separate from that which it symbolises.

Bion makes sophisticated use of Klein and Segal's developments of projective identification to introduce his valuable concepts of the container and the contained and alpha and beta elements and alpha functioning. In *Learning from Experience* he describes an aspect of projective identification thus: 'the infant projects a part of its psyche, namely its bad feelings, into a good breast.' (Bion 1984, p.90). He goes on to describe how the bad feelings' sojourn in the good

breast allow them to be modified and re-introjected by the infant in a manner that is bearable. Bion uses the term beta elements to denote the unbearable primitive raw elements that the infant needs to evacuate. Once they have been modified in the breast, by what he terms alpha function, they are then re-introjected as alpha elements, which can be thought about and used as symbols and ideas. This image and concept led him to the idea of the container, in which the beta elements, the contained are modified. If all goes well and the mother can contain the infant's anxiety, the beta elements, and metabolise them through alpha function into alpha elements, then the infant can not only re-introject the modified elements but also the function of the containing mother as well, building the infant's own internal container that can hold on to beta elements long enough to allow her own alpha function to modify them into alpha elements, which can be useful for thought and further development.

So, if all that goes well, and what a turbulent and precarious start to life is being described here, if all goes well, then there is the possibility of the establishment of a healthy mental apparatus. And this model of functioning is what I suggest is taking place in the psyche and body of the improvising performer, when things are going well.

So, to return to the improvising performer, maybe it is useful to conceptualise her process as a relationship between two objects, the infant with her nascent ego and the good breast or the container. The infant, that infant part of the performer, dealing with the vicissitudes of early life, the early life of the improvisation when nothing is known but rather when unconscious phantasy is

already active, the infant aspect of the mind projects beta elements, those raw impulses, thoughts and feelings that arise from the anxiety, excitement and heightened sense of self-consciousness that emerge in moments of improvised performance, into the container part of the performer. There, through the unknowable process of alpha-function, they are sifted, modified, metabolised and used for creative action, transformed into a knowable performative action, be that speech, action, movement or combinations thereof. Knowing that these elements have been transformed from beta-like formless and unknowable instincts and impulses into useful and useable alpha-like elements, the infant part of the performer re-introjects both them and, increasingly, the function of the container as well. There is increasing confidence that the raw material that is produced will be contained, that the anxiety that it produces can be thought about and borne. Through progressive introjection and projection a discourse or conversation or continuous feedback loop occurs that sustains the development in the infant and the improvisation for the performer. I suggest that the practice and 'rehearsal' of improvisation – the act of doing it again and again forms a 'performance ego' which has managed to unconsciously internalise at its centre an object with the capacity to think. Because creativity and creative action is an active process, the improvising performer has to be able to allow access to, and to bear the anxieties of paranoid-schizoid functioning, and at the same time to be available to herself as a container capable of allowing alpha-function to take place.

There is a tension for HE students involved in courses with creative practice at their heart and perhaps for all students. The very nature of the subjects they are involved with, Drama, Theatre and Performance, Music, Art, Design etcetera asks them to take risks, to risk authentic contact, both with their own desires and impulses and with others, be they other students involved in creative action, or audiences. Most creative action has improvisation at its heart, to a greater or lesser extent. To return to Grotowski's definition of theatre: 'theatre cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion' (Grotowski 2002 p.19). For the improvising artist I suggest that this live communion must also be with the self, a communion involving the transubstantiation of the unconscious to make it available for a type of secondary revision, a performance dreamwork leading to the forming and performing of understandable and authentic material.

To allow students to develop their practice, I'd suggest that educationists would benefit from understanding how to model Bion's container function, to be able to bear and modify our students' anxieties, omnipotence, splitting and other primitive defensive actions. Perhaps we all need to find access to what Bion calls the mother's 'reverie...her capacity with love to think about her infant' (O'Shaughnessy, 1988, p. 179), so that we can accept the projective identifications of our students, whether they feel them to be bad or good, and model this for them with the hope that they will re-introject and strengthen this function. As Andrew Murray has suggested in his presentation, the training of educators in psychoanalytic observation would help us all to understand better

the nature of this reverie and the consequences of its failure to manifest. In the same panel Kay Goddard sensitively explored through her own clinical material the consequences of the failure of the containing function. We do not want to repeat these failures as educationalists through lack of understanding or knowledge about the consequences of these failures. There are many frames that an educationist has to understand and maintain and those of you who are psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, or who, like me are in training will know the difficulties in always maintaining that particular analytic stance and the attacks on the frame that need to be borne. But perhaps a broader conversation amongst educationists about the nature of all of these frames through the lens of psychoanalysis would help us to enhance ours and our students' experience of the difficulties and joys, successes and failures of creative action.

There is a concern outlined by Stephen Frosh, Andrew Murray and many other delegates that there is no space in educational settings to do this thinking. *New Associations*, the newspaper published by the British Psychoanalytic Council contained recently articles about the need for psychoanalysis to be more outward looking. I think that engaging cross-disciplinary research projects situated within universities that have access to research funding, particularly as research councils such as the AHRC are trying to encourage this cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional approach, are the places that can facilitate this research, reaching out to primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions as sites for research projects to take place.

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