

HEALING THROUGH THE UNLIMITED LENS OF THEATER AND THE CREATIVE ARTS:

DRAMA THERAPIST, SALLY GRAZI-SHATZKES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
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After a full year of being part of Sally's Witness Theater program, in which students interact with, and tell the stories of, Holocaust survivors, I observed how Sally's work not only impacted the participants but anyone who witnessed it as well. I wanted to share with our readers how Sally uniquely gives back to the community through her profession as a drama therapist. Sally gladly agreed to be interviewed. Sally explained how she arrived at her career path and how she uses her skills to help people of all ages daily.

1. Could you explain what drama therapy is and how it works?

Drama therapy is an active, experiential approach to facilitating change. It involves the intentional use of theater techniques for psychological purposes.

2. What do drama therapists do and what are the educational requirements to become one?

Drama therapists are, in every way, mental health professionals... but we are also artists. So any kind of psychological intervention or counseling or therapy that we are doing is going to involve techniques from the theater. Which gives us a really really big "box of tools"



to help our clients. Depending on who the client is and what their needs are, that's what determines what we do, when we do it, and how we do it. One client may benefit from role play, while another may benefit from script writing, while another may benefit from puppetry. What I love about drama therapy is that we are always thinking outside the box and engaging creative approaches to healing.

3. How do you determine what techniques to use? Like when would puppetry be better than role play?

There are many different factors that need to be considered. But one important factor is Distance. When choosing an intervention or technique we want to strike what we call "aesthetic distance," which is the gap between the clients conscious reality and the fictional reality created in a therapy session. Depending on how distanced the client already is from his/her conflict/issue, a drama therapist may try to lessen or widen that gap in an attempt to reconcile the client with the issue at hand.

4. Is projective identification the opposite of that?

No. Projective identification is when you project a character or a conflict onto an object or story. For example, you can project a characteristic of yourself onto a drawing or a puppet or a role in a story. This technique helps create the distance we just mentioned in the last question between fictional reality and conscious reality.

5. Do you have to do internships to get your degree? What levels of education did you have to complete?

In college you have to already be focusing on theater and psychology. So, a major in theater and minor in psychology, or vice versa. I myself graduated with a BA in theater from Columbia University that included a minor in psychology. After college, it is recommended to attend a graduate program specifically for drama therapy, as this would be required down the line for a NY State license. The masters program in Drama Therapy at NYU required us to complete 800 hours of internship over the course of the two to three years in the program.

6. What school of NYU did you study at?

I studied at the Steinhardt School of Education (which I believe has been renamed). After I graduated I had to apply for a limited permit, complete 1500 hours of paid drama therapy work and take two licensing exams in order to receive my official NYS license in Creative Arts Therapy, which is one of the only licenses of that kind in the country. The LCAT:

Licensed Creative Arts Therapy is an umbrella license that includes art, music, dance and drama therapies. Depending on your specialty you also need to be registered with your national organization. So every creative arts therapist is also going to be a registered something. I'm a Registered Drama Therapist. Mrs. Dayan, for example, has the same LCAT but she is a Registered Art Therapist.

7. Were your internships done at Flatbush or elsewhere?

I did my first internship at FECS, which is an outpatient day treatment program for adults with emotional disturbance and mental illness. These were people who didn't need hospital care but needed guidance and support in functioning within their communities, getting jobs, finding housing, and seeking emotional support. We offered all different kinds of counseling and support groups.

My second internship was at a place called KidEsteem, out in Babylon, Long Island. It was a summer program for kids run by a couple named Lee and Mary Anne Chasen, who were both drama therapists. Their goal was to create an after school and summer program to help kids with all kinds of social and emotional issues through drama. There were groups for kids with anxiety, anger management problems, trouble making friends... and they would all run through drama.

My third internship was at Menorah Home and Hospital in Manhattan Beach. It's in a big nursing

care facility. I worked there doing drama therapy for patients with Alzheimer's, patients in hospice care, patients with brain injuries...all kinds of chronic and debilitating conditions. So that was a whole different population. After that, I was able to take my licensing exam, and then I was able to start my official career at Flatbush.

8. Did you get experience at every age range?

Yes. And lucky for me, my job at Flatbush gives me the opportunity to work with the very young to the very old!

9. Is there an age range in which drama therapy is most effective, or do you find that it's more universal?

Drama therapy can be universally effective. But it is less about the field and more about the fit between the client and therapist, as well as the skills of the therapist and the interventions he/she makes.

10. Would I be able to benefit from drama therapy on a regular basis even though I don't have any serious mental or emotional issues?

Sure. I mean if you were seeking therapy to iron out any kind of issue or even just to explore your own sense of self, then yes, you could benefit from a drama therapist. Drama therapists can certainly help regular, or what we call "normal neurotic" people. Everyone needs a good therapist every now and then to get us through the tumult of life. I

myself sought out a drama therapist when I was at NYU and it was recommended to us to feel what it is like to be on the client side of therapy.

11. Do you have to go through drama therapy yourself to be a drama therapist?

It is recommended that you be in some - really any - form of therapy. I saw a drama therapist because I was curious to see what it looked like in a private practice setting. Since I had never been in therapy before, I agreed that it was important to feel what it was like from the client's perspective. And honestly, I learned things about myself that I never knew. Tons of things.

12. Could you name me a few illnesses that could be treated with drama therapy?

Drama therapists work all over the place: in psychiatric units, with severely debilitated or suicidal people, in prisons, with maximum security incarcerated people, and they work with people who have difficulty with socialization. They really span the gamut. I myself specialize with kids whose parents are divorced and have all kinds of different needs. We also work with people who are seeking life coaching and general emotional help. There are so many different conditions that we can address.

13. What would you say your typical day is like as a drama therapist?

I am at work at 8 AM in Flatbush elementary school and by 8:30 I am starting my first group. I am seeing kids with divorced parents in groups by their grade. So I'll see a group of first graders or fourth graders or a group of kindergarteners. It's a half an hour session. We do different types of activities that are geared towards healthy relationships and collaboration and communication and when the group is over I am doing my paperwork. I have to write a note on every kid that I see. So if there are seven kids I am doing seven pieces of paper work.

Then I might go into a 1st or 2nd grade class where I do a puppet program called Friends and Feelings. I have two puppets named Tommy and Amy - you can ask your siblings about them. They have become the mascots for the Flatbush Five, which are five foundations of character that Flatbush

has branded as part of their philosophy and educational framework. I'll go in with an intern and we'll do one of five original puppet shows, which I wrote. Then we'll have an interactive discussion with the kids, and then the kids come up and talk to the puppets. And they suggest healthy alternatives to the puppets' behaviors because the puppets are always misbehaving and doing the wrong things. The kids have to say what they saw that was wrong and then they suggest what would be a better alternative to that situation. In that way they are learning what these character values actually mean and what behaviors are more appropriate and acceptable.

So I'll do a puppet show, or two or even three back to back and then I come over to the highschool by 11 o'clock where I direct the Hebrew play and we'll have two periods of rehearsal. Every year we put on a full musical in Hebrew. I usually finish work at one, except when I have Witness Theater and on those days I come back at 4:30 and then after I put my kids to sleep I go back to work, whether it's writing/editing script writing or planning my next

Witness Theater session, or I might make a few phone calls to parents of my elementary school kids who I didn't have time to speak to during the day. On Shabbat I run the girls youth class at my shul group (at Bnei Yitzhak) and even in my shul group I am using different theater techniques that foster healthy communication and working together.

14. Do you think that drama therapy is more effective in bigger or smaller groups?

I think it's most effective in groups period. Could be a big group, could be a small group, but we normally work in groups.

15. So it's usually not a one-on-one thing?

It could be, but I would be less inclined to use drama therapy in a one-on-one setting. I would probably be doing more talk therapy and then maybe some drama therapy intervention, but theater by nature is a social sport. Even if I am teaching a private drama lesson, I would do it in a small group.



16. What made you want to specialize in kids?

I wanted to specialize in the Yeshivah of Flatbush. I wanted to go back to my community and back to my school and to use all the foundations of education and character that Flatbush had instilled in me, to give back to my alma mater. I knew that the Yeshivah of Flatbush community would respect my profession and would give me freedom to experiment with my creativity. They didn't really know exactly what I did or what I could do. They didn't really understand drama therapy, but they respected me enough to take a leap of faith and invite me to bring my dreams and visions into the school. They have supported me every step of the way in the 13 years that I have worked there. They are really my family.

17. Do you see immediate improvement in the kids that you work with? Or is the improvement more long-term. And what type of progress do you observe?

I would say I see more long-term improvement and that's because I do long-term programs. Like the kids with divorced parents- I'm seeing them year after year, from when I find out their parents are divorced until they graduate. Witness Theater is also long-term. I'm seeing the effects on my students over the course of the entire year. When I speak to the students or I read from their blogs, I know that there is an immediate response and effect. But it is also a long-term growth process. When I speak to parents, and they tell me that their child came to them and said, "I am having a difficult time with this," or "can we make some time to speak about this," to me - that is a victory. Or if I spend months with a group and we're doing art projects and collaborative games, and then all of a sudden, one student comes in and says, "my dad is getting remarried and I'm really not happy about it," that to me is also a victory because we created the time and space where he feels comfortable discussing it in our closed group. Another kind of victory would be if a parent called me to say, "I think my son needs therapy. I'm need help finding a therapist for him." To know that I was the first therapist that worked with that student, and that in some way I was a catalyst to his receiving the therapy he needs - that's a win in my book.

18. Do you have an office outside of Flatbush?

No, I only work at Flatbush.

19. Do you typically work with other drama therapists on a day to day basis?

No I don't work with any other drama therapists on a day-to-day basis but I consult with my supervisor who is a drama therapist and I have monthly meetings with the other drama therapists who run Witness Theater in other sites.

20. If a kid finally decides to go to therapy, would you communicate with them to tell them what you know?

You mean their therapist? All the time. I speak to outside therapists all the time.

21. So it's almost like a doctor's office. If you switch doctors you have to transfer all of the paper work as well.

Right. But we aren't transferring. We are communicating and establishing ongoing conversation that will work to support the student in all areas. I dont stop seeing my students when they see therapists outside the school. I continue their support at school while their therapist offers support outside.

22. Do you communicate with doctors at all?

Sometimes with a psychiatrist or neurologist, but not usually.

23. What tough decisions do you have to make on a day-to-day basis?

My supervisor always helps with tough decisions. I would never make these on my own. For example, I might suggest to my supervisor that a student look at switching to a different school but I would never suggest that to the parents. That would be done by the principal or the head of my department. But for me, the toughest decisions are who gets into Witness Theater. Witness Theater is a program in which Holocaust Survivors spend a year with a group of high school students, sharing their stories and their life legacies and culminating with a public performance that is based on their stories from the war.

That's the hardest part of my job - turning students away - because I know that for many, this is a devastating blow. And to turn anyone away who wants to do good - it feels awful. Unfortunately, its an intimate program and is very selective.

24. How do you find that art therapy, music therapy and drama therapy overlap?

I do a lot of artistic projects but I don't necessarily assess people's art. But I do use art in my practice. And certainly when it comes to music, it plays a big part in Witness Theater and in the Hebrew play. There is certainly a lot of overlap, but my interventions are most heavily informed by theater. Generally though, a creative arts therapist uses all of the different modalities.

25. How do you decide what activities to do in Witness Theater?

The first few years were trial and error. And every time something worked I would write it down. So

now I have a whole structured program and I use it every year.

26. What is your personal motto?

I would say, seize the day. Take advantage of every minute that we have. I have different mottos depending on where I am and what I'm doing, but that one is applicable to every situation. 🎵

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I believe deeply in the power of theater to teach, to change and to heal. As a drama therapist and theater educator I am in the unique position to facilitate these vital life experiences every single day through the unlimited lens of theater and the creative arts. In this way I am able to help my students and clients- young and old - to connect to their creative potential, their spirituality, and their fellow human beings. I encourage people to delve beneath the surface, to visualize and to wonder out loud. And through creative mediums I facilitate real life experiences of empathy - the most integral quality of human connection.

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