

Adventures in Psychodrama, by Dr. Peter A. Olsson. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017, 70 pp.

Dr. Peter Olsson has self-published paperbacks that run the gamut about destructive and apocalyptic cults, Osama bin Laden, and domestic terrorism in America. *Adventures in Psychodrama*, while apparently more clerical in tone and centered on relatively sane, down-to-earth patients, is not entirely separate in scope. War criminals or veterans, recovering junkies, and those badly maimed by injury beyond the physical are sometimes tough patients to pull out of a self-destructive rut; doctors cannot be the ones to judge. As readers, we are ourselves like patients taking a journey in Peter Olsson's *Adventures of Psychodrama*. If the long cast of characters in Dr. Olsson's self-published book, among them Vietnam War survivors and victims of savage child abuse, had been captured via writing in their prime instead of long after, this book might have read more like a series of synopses of one-acts that, if treated as one long play, might educate audience members of the group session or readers of the book. In that way, through all the different channels, one would experience the darkest conceivable shades of trauma from the past in the present.

The steps of administering psychodrama therapy to a small group of patients sound remarkably like handing out rules in a theater or theater-writing class, and it's an analogy that comes back. There are five classic phases of psychodrama: (1) warm-up, (2) setting the scene, (3) rising action, (4) climax, (5) audience group share-back (p. 12). In order for a psychodrama group session to be effective, a doctor leading a group of six or so participants must get a bit creative, since most of the trauma being treated in *Adventures in Psychodrama* is awkward to pin down and actually treat.

"As his own headache, [a patient] Pat proceeded to describe what he felt were his numerous past sins of getting numerous women pregnant and not caring for the children that resulted," writes Olsson, describing one instance in which a session of psychodrama therapy helped an older male patient overcome trauma that caused headaches, which could just as easily be described and seen by the patient as lapses in integrity. "Pat's entire superego function seemed to be relegated to the headache. This seemed to come out of an apparent fear of loss of control and the resulting total irresponsibility" (p. 54). A selling point of psychodrama to patients is that it refuses to delegate a person's mistakes to some existing framework for what behaviors are considered healthy or fine, as might be the case if this were a drama class session—not a psychodrama class.

That's what Dr. Olsson calls them, "class sessions," and if that makes him, the doctor, a teacher to his patients, there was a sense that his injured adults were given license to shut off agency and follow his direction without protest—their intention, as a team, is to heal and to help others heal. As we know, Peter Olsson himself is versed in how not to lapse into group teaching that's more cult-like than what we get in *Adventures in Psychodrama*. One might hesitate before trying this at home as a psychotherapist with patients to help, for it could be true that if psychodrama therapy were administered by a doctor-director less versed in the practice, it might not go as well as in this book, which offers some evidence that psychodrama can save lives. Olsson himself makes a connection to directing an actual stage or screen drama only to undermine it repeatedly: "Unlike the Hollywood movie director who stays at a distance back of the camera it is crucial that the director stay close to the patient who has chosen to have his life situation on focus" (p. iii). Iffy boundaries aside wherein transference becomes inevitable, the suggestion here is that in order for a doctor to effectively "direct" a psychodrama therapy session, they must be experienced not in directing per se but in diagnosing real patients. This would allow them to attribute physiological symptoms of illness to psychological difficulties experienced by the person they are treating. It would just take experience.

Olsson describes once almost being hit over the head by a patient who, after having been physically abused by his father and losing his arm to an infection, had "one of those metal arm-hand prostheses with metal graspers . . . I saw it coming out of the corner of my eye as it glinted in sunlight coming from the day hospital window nearby. I ducked. Jack's metal hand and arm embedded in the sheet rock wall. An aid and I held Jack down and he began to sob" (p. 2). While the "adventure" drama that moves the book along was sometimes lost to the starkness of tragedy at instances when the author seemed to be trying to evoke a narrative, for this reader, recollections of group therapy were as respectful as one would expect from an experienced psychiatrist. He intends to write accurately about psychodrama, a clearly effective, probably underutilized technique. Particularly striking was the doctor's attitude of forgiveness following any brushes with death (and there were a few); for instance, after being begged for it by Jack, who couldn't even remember attacking the man trying to help him, the patient reportedly said to Dr. Olsson, "Thanks, Dad, now I have some real friends"—referring to the other patients as friends in the group therapy session. These patients, under the doctor's jurisdiction, by acting on command, helped facilitate Jack's long-standing recovery from a life maimed by serious trauma.

The high volume of Vietnam War recollections sometimes made this book feel like a period piece set in a past where group therapy could get literally touchy-feely. It's unclear whether this kind of therapy still could happen after the pandemic, when people rarely meet in person let alone engage with one another physically—but this might also be what makes reading it interesting as the times quickly change. The personalities we get to learn from, patients of casual group therapy, are not treated as just ciphers for the computer to diagnose but instead as characters with idiosyncratic ways about their suffering. A person named Stan in one group once complains, as though still living in a war no longer happening, “that damn Joan Baez and Jane Fonda came here to call us baby killers . . . at concerts here as we were being shot at doing our duty” (p. 23). Scenes of patients might strike a patient or medical provider already tentative about diving into psychodrama as vexing (I wondered if the author took some liberties in order to make the book more interesting), but the book shouldn't strike readers hoping to learn the technique as unsympathetic to serious victims of trauma—only a bit theatrical, perhaps.

For the most part Olsson seems to have a solid grasp on how much patients and members of group are willing to put themselves through to help actually heal one individual. This is perhaps the most uplifting takeaway from *Adventures in Psychodrama*: the evidence it provides that trauma victims are willing to help out a fellow patient without passing judgement, with a precondition that the helpers are put in a vulnerable enough position themselves so this does not become another Stanford Prison Experiment. Expertise is what allowed Olsson's class sessions to become a useful rendezvous for people in need of empathy (and not merely sympathy, which can morph quickly to condescension when amateurs are brought in). The one-line summary is that a team was asked to help act out and recreate the worst moments in one injured patient's life. Psychodrama group therapy seems to work constructively, fast, and powerfully, despite risks of violence in the classroom that should not be taken lightly.

Morgan Wilcock
morgan.wilcock@gmail.com