

A GIRL'S EYE VIEW
The Drama of Self-Image Through Image Theatre

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ABOUT CATHY PLOURDE

Cathy Plourde is a former high school teacher who now freelances as a playwright, educator and consultant. Her training has been through Norwich University's Vermont College (MA, Theatre and Social Change), at Middlebury College's Breadloaf School of English under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for graduate course work in theatre, and at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (BS, Communication Education). She has done residencies, performances, workshops, trainings, and taken commissions for such groups as The Maine Women's Fund, Mainely Girls, the Portland YWCA/Where the Girls Are Conference, Project Greenpurse of Seattle, the Maine Alliance for Arts Education, the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence (and its affiliates) as well as many Maine schools. Cathy has presented regionally, nationally, and in Canada about her work and the use of theatre as a socially relevant educational tool.

Her recent plays, THE THIN LINE, a one-woman play addressing eating disorders, and YOU THE MAN, a one-man play addressing sexual assault and dating abuse are currently touring to schools, colleges and conferences. Contact for booking 207-653-4554.

***"Do we want to give the child an image of himself--mirror vision?
Or do we want what is real?"***

"An image is something that helps us catch a glimpse of reality."

--Madeleine L'Engle, A Circle of Quiet

To describe his philosophy of theatre practice, Augusto Boal (Games for Actors and Non-Actors, 1992) uses the term *maieutics*, the Socratic process of assisting a person to bring into clear consciousness conceptions previously latent in the mind, and the concept of Image Theatre.¹ Image Theatre's maieutic properties provide flexible tools for creating exciting, high-quality and socially significant theatre. I have explored Image Theatre techniques in a workshop for girls and documenting their experiences. This project is appropriately related to the work I have been doing in Maine for the last several years, writing and directing plays for girls, as well as working with girls to script or create their own pieces.² With this paper I hope to reinforce the need to provide girls with such opportunities as well as testify to the efficacy and great potential implications of Image Theatre.

¹"Image Theatre is a series of exercises and games designed to uncover essential truths about societies and cultures without resort, in the first instance, to spoken language-- though this may be added in the various 'dynamisations' of the images. The participants in Image Theatre make still images of their lives, feelings, experiences, oppressions; groups suggest titles or themes, and then individuals 'sculpt' three-dimensional images under these titles, using their own and others' bodies as the 'clay'...[T]he frozen image is simply the starting point for or prelude to the action, which is revealed in the dynamisation process, the bringing to life of the images and the discovery of whatever direction or intention is innate in them." (From the introduction to Games for Actors and Non-Actors, 1992.)

²For myself in this project, I hoped that this workshop would inform my own writing of a play dealing with eating disorders and body loathing, giving me a girl's eye view of self-image, a nebulous concept that is tangled up with a myriad of issues.

Susan Potters, the director of the Bangor Maine Alliance for Arts in Education, approached me to run a summer workshop for her daughter and other girls aged 11 to 14. She shared with me that these girls were beginning to struggle with self-image as they approached adolescence. For example, one girl felt what she weighed was more important than the fact that she is a talented musician. All the girls, eight in number, were from middle and upper-middle class Caucasian families from two neighboring communities, Bangor and Orono, Maine, and all the girls had had experience being on stage. We agreed that I would offer six four-hour sessions over a two-week period, during which I would use Image Theatre techniques and focus on body image and self-esteem. The culminating event was to be a performance dealing with the experiences of being a girl.

What follows is an outline of the performance that was created in the six sessions and performed by seven of the eight girls.³ While the play had rehearsals and a few run-throughs in which decisions were made about content, objectives and timing, and while there was even some spotty memorization, the play was based on and was performed as an orchestrated improvisation. The audience consisted of parents, family, and friends who became privy to the process, feelings, and impressions raised by the girls in the workshop activities. For these parents who shared in the performance, and for educators and practitioners of theatre for social change who have become my audience, I hope that this girls' eye view of the world will be useful as we work to maintain meaningful connections and relationships with the young women in our lives.

³One girl had to leave for camp and would miss the last day and the performance. I asked her to assist me in directing the group, and her subsequently more objective position was extremely useful to the girls performing.

The Beginning: "We are the ones who are girls. We are the ones who..."

One by one the girls filed in to start the performance, proclaiming and introducing to the audience who they were and who they wanted to be with grand statements: "We are the ones who are girls. We are the ones who can swim the 50 meter race..." They gave testimony in these one word sentences to how strong they were, how creative, how humorous, and how serious they were. These statements came from a writing prompt given on the first day: "I am the one who..." While I had selected a combination of standard theatre games (e.g., Word Ball and Freeze) and Boal's integration exercises (e.g., Colombian Hypnosis and French Telephone) to lead into Image Theatre sequencing, I had also included timed writing prompts. Having just twenty-four hours to put a performance together, I wanted to immediately begin to capture ideas that were grounded in their very personal impressions of themselves and each other. The resulting stream-of-conscious personal writing which the girls were encouraged to share out loud afterwards helped to speed up and deepen the level of intimacy and trust, as well as generate raw material to be incorporated into the performance. Writing also served to include an additional learning style as well as establish ownership of the performance they had just begun to create.

"Girls can..!"

After their entrance and self-arrangement in the playing area with "We are the ones who..." statements, the girls played *word ball*⁴ with "Girls can..." statements. Word ball and one-word poetry had been a regular part of our routine to warm up the group and

⁴Word ball is an association game in which the players, in a circle, "throw" a word to another. The throw is communicated by eye contact. The person who has "caught" the word tosses the first word she thinks to another person. The pace is quick and concentration is developed.

practice listening and improv skills. The statements the girls tossed to one another began as simple associations and grew into full challenges; they were serious and silly, touching as well as harsh, personal as well as universal. I feel that while these statements were a way for the girls to gather courage and momentum to go into the following scenes that might make them feel vulnerable, they were also a contextual reminder for the audience that there were powerful, ambitious, and creative young women in their charge. These "Girls can" statements chosen by the girls were also germinated in a timed writing prompt.⁵

The transition out of the energetic and amusing game of "Girls can" had been agreed upon in rehearsal: when the game was beginning to peter out, one girl was to say "Girls can fall asleep!" whereupon they all would do so and conclude the introduction. Once "asleep," together they said over and over, "Girls can dream, girls can dream..." while they sleep-walked into places for the next scene. This next scene and the party scene that follows were the heart of the performance, and their development relied greatly on Image Theatre techniques.

The girls and I had spent time talking about the experiences and challenges that the girls faced at home and in school, listing situations that would make a girl feel unhappy, stressed, or not confident. The following list is a good representation of what the girls generated:

- Situations that would make a girl feel unhappy, stressed or unconfident (sic).
1. If you are asked to do drugs with "popular" people and you are considered "unpopular."

⁵In a time where feminist psychology and Best-selling author Mary Pipher (Reviving Ophelia) are speaking of girls "losing their voice," I was thrilled to find these girls hadn't fully given in to this phenomenon yet: After a timed writing of "Girls can" statements, I followed immediately with a request that they list "Girls *can't*" statements. They bent their heads, put their pencils down on paper, wrote the prompt, and basically stopped right there. One girl wrote that girls can't fly, which she immediately qualified with "unless they are dreaming" and another wrote down that girls can't use urinals, but essentially, they looked at their paper, looked up at me and each other quizzically, and had absolutely nothing to say to this statement!

2. If a cute boy makes a rude remark about how you look.
3. If you are not included in a social situation.
4. If everybody in the popular group weighs less than you.

Also contributing to the development of the action of their play was the writing prompt, "The trouble with parents...." One girl's list had very specific complaints:

The trouble with parents

1. they always want to know who you were talking to on the phone
2. they need to know exactly (sic) what time you'll be home
3. they want you to clean your room all the time
4. they don't give me as much independence as I want.

Another's list was just as specific while more global in concern:

The trouble with parents

- communication parents:children as Japanese: Russian
- parents are the people you are fighting against
- want to know and help your life--you don't want them to
- sometimes they don't you give you the time or space you need
- don't understand the changes in society from when they were kids

After the writing and discussion, we spent much time was modeling or sculpting each other into images of these situations. The girls were excited by the role of "image sculptor", and became very quick with wordlessly molding arms and hips and mouths of the others into place. Likewise the girls were receptive to being placed and prodded into position (the only difficulty being with the group giggler who was at times willing but unable to hold the desired facial poses). Of the various games we had played during the workshop, the improv game of *freeze*⁶ had become a favorite activity with the girls; their experience playing the freeze game made the dynamisation⁷ of the sculpted images an

⁶In pairs, two players start improvising a scene. At any point, and hopefully before too long, another player from the audience calls out "freeze!" and is literally obeyed. The new person taps out one of the frozen players, assumes her exact physical position and uses the physicality of the situation to begin a new scene. The person remaining from the initial scene is obliged to shift gears and engage in the new action in whatever character might be appropriate.

⁷Boal uses the term 'dynamise' which I understand to be a derivative of the word

easy concept for them to grasp. Unlike in the freeze game, dynamising an established image allowed us to return to that original image repeatedly with different girls in different parts, playing out different possibilities and perspectives. With the girls understanding this new technique of modeling an image and adding action and words, we returned to their lists of issues and situations, along with the parental concerns, to fulfill our task of creating a play that deals with the experiences of being a girl. Armed with their lists and writings, each girl was asked to either write a plot outline which we could improv, or write the actual script for a monologue or scene.

Scene I: "Popular, insecure girl gets quality time with not-so-popular confident girl (while their mothers go out to lunch)."

The scenario above was conceived by Brandy;* it was the first scene we explored and it became the first scene in the performance to follow the introduction. I approached our development of the scene similarly to how Boal had done at a workshop I had participated in last August in Chicago (ATHE '97). In the scenario Brandy outlined, she established for us the characters, two girls and their mothers, and their personality traits. Once we understood the story-line, she elected to play the character of the snob, and she selected Lacey to play the other girl. After giving Lacey more detailed instructions on the new character she was to play, Brandy and Lacey began to improv the scene between the girls. When they had carried the scene as far as it would go initially, I checked in with Brandy--has Lacey created the character you were looking for? And I turned to the rest of the girls, and asked, based on what Brandy had told us about her character, what was true and what was not? What was missing and what worked? In this way, and by

'dynamic,' meaning to bring action to the static images. In 'dynamisation,' i.e. making an image dynamic, sound as well as movement can be applied.

*The girls kept their real names in the performance to avoid confusion, although I have changed their names for this document.

starting over repeatedly, we were able to nail down the conflicts, internal and external, in the scene.

Having clarified characterizations, I then asked the girls watching to look carefully at each of the characters before us and to listen closely to their voices. I asked them to discover the "images" hidden in the characters. What "secret voices" were buried inside these characters? I wanted the girls to see and hear the little whiny girl, the jealous monster, and the devilish bully that were peeking out of what looked like an ordinary girl in front of us. The existence of these alter egos are clued only by subtle tones of voice or quick facial gestures: imbedded in a "nice person" can be a cast of other characters who hint at our secret desires, unvoiced feelings and repressed impulses! Perhaps my request wasn't communicated very clearly, because the girls did not understand what I wanted of them, and I wound up creating an image with a gesture and phrase to demonstrate. It was a challenge but we were able to create two images each for Brandy and Lacey's characters.

Brandy's angel and devil, as the girls wound up calling them and costuming them, respectively urged Brandy to "don't be nervous, be nice" and to "impress her!" Lacey's two dichotomous image/voices behind her alternately instructed her to laugh off Brandy's remarks, and to be mad at her rudeness. Because our small troupe allowed for only two image/voices per girl, the images quickly became polarized. Perhaps, too, this polarization was linked to the adolescent penchant for either/or, right/wrong, good/bad. Still, the image/voices served to illustrate the inner feelings of the characters, images inherently present but located just below the surface. The timing of their lines worked so that before Lacey or Brandy spoke, her image/voices had a chance to guide her on how to behave. The concept of distilling images from the characters can be abstract and intellectual, yet the embodiment of the images grounds the concept into a physical context. The creation of the image/voices allowed the girls to explore the idea of concurrent and conflicting voices and desires being present in one's mind and how their

presence informs one's behavior and decision-making.

Having highlighted how Image Theatre assisted in the development of Brandy and Lacey's characters and their accompanying "secret" image/voices, let's return to the actual scene Brandy had created. Brandy determined that to begin the scene, one mother and daughter pair were to be on stage establishing for the audience that Brandy-the-brat has to spend time with Lacey-the-loser while the two mothers go out for a long overdue and much deserved lunch date. Then Lacey and her mother, conversing loudly from off stage, reveal that Lacey is also unhappy with the arrangement. The girls' wishes are ignored. When the mothers are gone, Brandy plays the insolent-yet-proper host by offering Lacey a drink and exiting to get it, giving Lacey an opportunity to address the audience with a monologue about how frustrated and annoyed she feels in this situation. After Brandy returns and holds Lacey hostage with ridiculous bragging, Lacey excuses herself to go the bathroom, leaving Brandy time to share her fears and insecurities with the audience. When Lacey returns, the girls' talk evolves into complaints which they have in common, and they make a connection in spite of themselves. Their compatibility pleases the "nice" image/voices and frustrates the "bad" image/voices who all urge their respective characters--with their signature phrases--in between Lacey and Betty's lines. The effect is loud and humorous organized chaos!

I, along with the real parents, found the girls' portrayal of the mothers to be quite amusing as well. The mother characters spoke in high, flat, syrupy voices, didn't listen to a thing the girls had to say, and offered insufficient excuses as to why their daughters were unable to stay home alone (e.g., "*Well, you've seen the news dear, there're ax-murderers out there!*"). When the mothers initially met at the door there was a flurry of hysterical gushing and giggling, and the mothers, who thought the girls old enough to stay together (not alone) without a sitter, condescended to them ("*Now go and play nice, girls! Be good! Have fun!*"). This reflects the awkward and frustrating age of the girls, where they themselves shift from wanting to be treated as adults to wanting to be coddled

as children, depending on their desires and confidence in the situation. The portrayal of the mothers was consistent, and when the mothers returned from lunch with horrible gifts--little doll baby carriages, both girls quietly said thank you, but it was clear the girls didn't know how to communicate to their parents that the gifts were too babyish.

Scene II: "Sally's Party"

After workshopping Brandy's scene, I polled the rest of the girls to see what they had chosen to dramatize as a girl's experience. Four had created monologues dealing with drugs, friendship, weight and popularity, and the girls decided that they could fit them all together in a party situation. A party provided an easy transition out of the previous scene: Lacey and her mother leave as Brandy's mother wants to help Brandy get ready for a party that night. Searching for a place to begin creating Scene II, I asked the girls to sculpt real images of a party. After only a couple of versions, we were able to find one with which we could work.

The party segment, as with the rest of the piece, developed from the sculpting of still images, from the monologues, from the girls' writing, from discussion, and from the improv/rehearsal process. The transition into Scene II gives a sense of how the monologues were conducted: After exploring and establishing the characters and the monologues for the party, I asked each of the girls to create images for their own characters, much like the earlier image/voices that reflected the inner worlds of Betty and Lacey. Dynamised versions of these images served for our transition to the party scene: the gestures and phrases were used in repetition and sequence, at times simultaneous and at times individually, to prime the audience for the upcoming scene.

When ready to deliver her monologue during the party, each girl said "Freeze!", stepped out of the action of the scene, surveyed the frozen image from which she had

come, and then began. It is the images molded by the girls in the party scene, as they froze and redynamised at their will, which give expansive insight to the girls' painfully perceptive view of their social and cultural situation. The timing of the monologues was carefully choreographed in a seemingly complex yet highly logical pattern which had several social groups operating at once. Within the dynamic images they created, the girls quickly learned when to pull and give focus, understood what business had to be accomplished in the transitional improvised dialogue, and took charge of their play like seasoned experts. Here is a listing of the models, or moments in action that they designed, giving several perspectives on the singular experience of attending a party:

- The moment in action when a girl, talking with a friend, is physically interrupted and excluded by another girl, and the anger, jealousy as well as resistance to engaging in open conflict that follows.
- The moment in action when a girl is asked by a popular girl to attend another party where there will be older kids and more adult situations. In the girl's mind's eye is both the opportunity for perceived social advancement and acceptance; and, in her actual sight-line is her friend who would have to be abandoned in the process.
- The moment in action when a girl, large and struggling to feel comfortable in her body, is sitting among her friends who are making fun of a girl not present who they say is too large and a girl who is too tiny. She is able to step out of this scene and voice her struggle to feel good about herself, and how unfair it is to have her body.
- The moment in action when the two girls making fun of others catch themselves, realize how what they have done is hurtful to everyone, and struggle to know how else to behave. This stopping of the action allows one girl to acknowledge how body size is not an appropriate evaluation of worth, and allows the other girl to wonder what others may be saying about *her*.
- The moment in action when a girl sees herself standing outside the scene at hand, excluded from the intimacy, fun, and friendship that she previously thought she had within her control. She is faced with her own resistance and fear of finding out if she had been left out by accident or on purpose.

The physicality of these images, even as they shifted with dynamisation, made these complex feelings, thoughts and realities possible for us to see; freezing the action allowed the girls to step out of the scene for an opportunity to think, feel, and make

decisions before re-entering into the action.

To end the play, we circled back to the beginning of the piece to have the girls awaken from sleep. Conscious again, they asserted another round of "Girls can..." statements, a pledge to the girls' resilience and willingness to take the risks they will encounter traveling through to the other side of adolescence.

Contemplating the Image

Just as the girls stepped out to examine their situations, I have stepped back to examine the impact of Image Theatre on the girls participating in the workshop. To do so, I found it helpful to draw from women's psychology and girls development. Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan conducted a long-term research project with girls journeying into and through adolescence, documented in their book Meeting at the Crossroads (1992). I have observed in the Orono workshop what Brown and Gilligan identify in their research:

[As] twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls stand at the threshold of early adolescence, they experience some of the implications of the prevailing social order of relationships as it complicates their efforts to stay in connection with themselves and with other people (166).

Girls are well aware of the importance and relevance of relationships in their lives and how popularity, body size, drugs and friendships factor into their experience. This awareness, this knowing, is a powerful tool, as they negotiate their world, though they may become overwhelmed with this awareness:

[A]wareness, although protective, takes them outside of themselves; and, looking at themselves and listening to themselves, they begin to change their looks, modulate their voices, and monitor their behavior in relation to the looks and the voices of others in the world in which they are living. Thus at adolescence, girls can become more readily disconnected from what they are feeling, distanced from their own desires and pleasures, and therefore, ironically, more reliant on others who tell them what they want and feel and think and know (169).

The question, therefore, is whether or not the awareness and self-examination experienced through Image Theatre is contributing to this disconnectedness? I don't believe it does. By using a *theatrical* context to help raise girls' awareness, it is possible to hold *balance* in their knowing and *encourage* connectedness because in a play, the players obviously need to remain engaged in order to carry the action. What transpires on stage, therefore, is a practicing of connection rather than disconnection, a rehearsal for life. It is impossible to predict or lay claims to the levels of personal growth experienced through Image Theatre work, but on artistic and mechanical levels, the use of the techniques in the workshop resulted in the girls performing at a very high level of competency, with engagement in active listening, commitment to the moment of dramatic action, and deft improvisation within a loosely defined script. One of the parents, a professional actor herself, told me that she had seen her daughter reach a plateau in her acting abilities prior to this project, but in this performance the mother saw strength, confidence, and believability in her daughter's work.

The girls' responses to these techniques must also be considered. I asked the girls at the end of each workshop day to identify what they themselves had done well, what they would do differently, and what someone else had done well. Sally had played the image/voice who urged Lacey to, "Just laugh it off." On the day we first worked on the images for Lacey and Brandy, Sally wrote, "I think I don't want to be the voice." She stuck with it, though, and once the girls had become more confident in what they were doing, and had found a rhythm for their lines, the foursome developed into a powerful and funny part of the piece. In spite of my difficulty in explaining the activity and any initial apprehension, the girls managed to make the image/voices component of the piece their own and have it work well.

Further, of all the Image Theatre techniques, the sculpting of images from the girls' lists of concerns and problems was the most powerful part of the process. As each girl was molded into place and as she tried to understand her purpose in the landscape of

the image, I not only witnessed the collaborative creative process at work but I also had a look at how the girls saw their world. The images we chose to dynamise in rehearsal and in the performance were literally of the world of the girls.

The monologues took a much deeper look at this world, in part due to their style of presentation. By pausing the action, much like having a pause button on a VCR, the playing the monologues allowed for specific moments to be considered more carefully and expansively by both the girls and those observing. For example, when Marybeth's friends asked how much she weighed--which happened to be the same weight as the girl whom they had just mocked--Marybeth *was* able to stop the action, escape from it for a moment, and address how unhappy the situation was making her. While Marybeth had to return to the action, she did so having expressed her feelings, and to friends who fortunately realized their insensitivity. In this workshop the girls expressed their feelings off the stage as well as on stage: during our final talk together, Lacey remarked that she thought that it was better this workshop didn't have boys in it, her reason not specifically verbalized for us but rather communicated in a gesture: "Otherwise, it would have been like this," she said, and she put her head down, hunched her shoulders and shrunk back into the couch. In this workshop they didn't have to worry about boys--though they did talk about them frequently!--they could just be girls. One girl wrote at the end, "that girls are powerful when it comes to bad situations but sometimes need a hand, like with weight, insults, and losing friends" and that she had learned, "how to handle situations."

Theatre practitioners need to continue examine alternatives such as Image Theatre and Forum Theatre and incorporate these concepts into our creative processes. It is reasonable to believe adjustments by theatre practitioners are necessary and desirable, just as Brown and Gilligan documented that in their research with girls they had to...

...shift the metaphoric language psychologists traditionally have used in speaking of change and development from an atomistic, positional, architectural, and highly visual language of structures, steps, and stages to a more associative and musical language of movement and feeling that

better conveys the complexity of the voices we hear and the psychological processes we wish to understand (23).

Image Theatre is a way to convey the complexities of girls' voices and their processes which we wish to understand. In its reliance on the participants for the creation of the content, and its ability to hold multiple realities in the form at the same time, Image Theatre offers a meaningful consideration of a girl's relationship to her world.

Image Theatre's acknowledgment of the power of the relationships that the players and characters have with themselves and each other makes it an even more viable approach to working with girls because, as Brown and Gilligan noted of themselves:

In working with girls and women, we are particularly attentive to their struggles for relationships that are authentic or resonant, that is, relationships in which they can freely express themselves or speak their feelings and thoughts and be heard (29).

It is in active authentic expression, physical as well as verbal, that situations can be broached and analyzed. Because "images...do not know or speak" (168), the embodiment and ensuing dynamisation of the images bring knowing and understanding to consciousness. Boal's Image Theatre is a way to "uncover essential truths about societies and cultures without resort, in the first instance, to spoken language" (Boal, xix). The first step of creating images in silence, of taking what we know and *showing* what it looks like allows us to acknowledge our personal and cultural silence, to pose in it, even return to it as needed; but, perhaps the most important feature of a first step is the intrinsic potential for a second step, a third step, and so on.

As a theatre practitioner, I join Brown, Gilligan, and others to...

...make it easier for girls' and women's voices to be heard and engaged openly in relationship--to encourage the open trouble of political resistance, the insistence on knowing what one knows and the willingness to be outspoken, rather than to collude in the silencing and avoidance of conflict that fosters the corrosive suffering of psychological resistance (41).

In seeking ways to address damaging (or even fatal) issues that plague our world, such as body loathing and eating disorders, Image Theatre can complement our medical, psychological and political sciences well, and can do so in a way that science cannot by touching us in places instruments and medicines and policies cannot.

Boal, Augusto. Games for Actors and Non-Actors. Trans. Adrian Jackson. Routledge: New York. 1992.

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