

The following is an excerpt from Working on the Inside: the Spiritual Life Through the Eyes of Actors, by Retta Blaney. Ms. Blaney has participated in a DZIECI workshop, seen the company work at Cabrini Hospital, and attended rehearsals, along with conducting private interviews with Matt Mitler, DZIECI's director.

SILENCE

The sense of the unexpected is what makes silence such an effective device in drama. Although it seems more fitting for contemplation than theatre, silence "is really the key in some respects" to the work of Matt Mitler's experimental theatre ensemble, DZIECI, which he founded in 1997. (DZIECI means "children" in Polish). Members of the company, which describes itself as "dedicated to a search for the 'sacred' through the medium of theatre", come together in silence before and after performances. They also rely on their practice of inner silence to see them through visits to the elderly, children with psychiatric problems and others in hospital settings. These visit/performances are required for DZIECI members, but they could be draining without the spiritual practice of silence, Mitler says. This practice includes each person stepping back from time to time throughout the visits, which can be day-long, to evaluate herself or himself, what Mitler calls, "taking a picture" of himself. "I turn my attention inward, to observe what is actually happening inside this vessel that is my body. It's like balancing a bowl of water on my head and that bowl of water is energy. The goal is not only not to spill all the energy at the hospital, but maybe to even have more energy as the result of such attention. That part of the work is a sacred process. Being quiet is being more balanced." Drawing on inner silence helps him deal with any patient, even those who may appear unpleasant. "If I approach them intellectually, it distances me. If it is with my whole person, I find compassion and I am able to do something but it doesn't come from me. I'm as touched as they are."

The ensemble balances its performances with works of service, through creative and therapeutic interaction with a variety of disadvantaged populations. DZIECI members believe that by helping others, a profound healing effect is generated that not only serves the patient, but also strengthens the ensemble's work.

"In a hospital or on stage, we create a community," says Mitler, who originally was trained in psychotherapy. "We need each other. It's a shared experience. The audience is thankful and, if we've done our work the right way, we feel thankful."

"We're using theatre as an act of service in the real Christian sense of the word. It also has a humbling effect on how we perform." These hospital visits rely on the group's expertise in clowning, acrobatics, choral singing and trust exercises to establish a bond with the patients, ultimately empowering them to join in the creative process.

HOSPITALITY

The actors' approach is to always appear less advantaged than the patients, coming in with tattered costumes and comic, misshapen teeth. "If they're fearful, we're more fearful," Mitler says. From there the actors work to build the trust of their patients, who frequently are children with psychiatric problems. "We act like we don't know what to do, and then we try to do something and we can't do it." Then DZIECI comes up with an idea for some acrobatics or something for which they seek the patients' help. Gradually they get the children to fall off a table into their arms, then the children fall into each other's arms and finally the staff people fall into the children's arms. That final role reversal of the staff person trusting the children empowers the children with the pride of having caught him. "That trust goes on after the performance," Mitler says. "We leave and something changes. They see the therapist or staff person differently, and the staff person sees the patient differently."

For older patients who are confined to a bed, the physical contact involves healing techniques and song. This was the approach they used while spending a Sunday at the Cabrini Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. After they assemble and change into their 15th century peasant costumes, made by the group's costumer Karen Hatt, they sit together for breathing exercises and rehearse a 16th century hymn. They then head down the hall, singing and, almost immediately, are met by a tiny Spanish-speaking woman who begins teaching them a hymn of her own, using her finger to direct them. She applauds enthusiastically when they finish, telling them "very good" in English and smiling broadly. They introduce themselves in Spanish and have a brief conversation before moving on again, singing, until they stop to serenade four women in wheelchairs. The women at first seem unresponsive, but as the members continue to sing, they hold the women's hands and gather closer. By the time they are ready to move on, one of the members, Rebecca Sokoll, has her head in a woman's lap and is holding both of her hands. Before she leaves, Sokoll hugs and kisses the woman who still does not speak but whose expression has changed from vacant to serene.

The ensemble members then move together into rooms, they kneel beside a woman who is sleeping. She wakes at the singing and looks startled at the people in the peasant costumes gathered around her. When she appears as though she may cry, Mitler puts his hand on her forehead. Then slowly she pulls her hands from under the covers and the members all reach to hold them. "Thank you for coming" she says in a weak voice, "thank you." She blows them kisses as they slowly back out.

DZIECI's hospitality has been noted in a letter by Cabrini's past therapeutic recreation director, who recalled seeing DZIECI members lift a disabled resident from her wheelchair and carry her as if she were floating on water. "I have been

unable to erase that image from my mind; and I hope I never forget it," he wrote. "Other residents responded to this work in a way that more traditional supportive techniques were unable to foster."

DZIECI members are paid only about half the time for their hospital visits, and then only nominal amounts. They put up their own money for publicity and space rentals. Their theatre performances are on a donation basis because "we believe no one should be excluded," says Mitler, who puts food on his own table by writing, directing, designing theatrical lighting, serving as a private acting coach, and doing comedy.

Ensemble members also are willing to barter; they did the laundry for one theatre company in exchange for rehearsal space. "We come with nothing," Mitler says. "We're like vow-of-poverty monks."

RITUAL

For the actors in DZIECI ritual is essential to their work as a company and as individuals. "One very defined ritual in our work, whether it's in a hospital or theatre, is that before we begin we gather in a circle and we're silent and still for a period of time as a way of searching inwardly and paying attention to where we are as a group," Mitler says. "We want to leave the past behind and the future alone and come in fairly much with a clean slate."

At the end of the performance, DZIECI members again gather in a circle of silence. "We want to feel the vibration of what we've just done and measure our state of energy from what it was before to what it is now; to see if it's moved in an evolutionary manner, if the energy is finer or coarser. And to check our movement on the path."

Mitler says this ritual is important to his own self-study. "I feel the energy in my chest and heart, an openness. That's my litmus test. We do it for self-change. If I have a transformational experience of some sort, then the audience can have a similar experience. If I'm false, it's manipulative. It always comes down to us working on ourselves."

The work on themselves is two-fold. Nearly all of the 15 members have his or her own spiritual path, which include Buddhist and Native American practices. Mitler, who embraces all religions, encourages this as a way to look inward and grow in self-awareness. The second part of working on themselves involves group activities in which ritual plays a large role. Four times a year, at the change of each season, DZIECI members spend time in upstate NY, at a Native American sweat lodge. In a day long process, they gather stones, chop wood for their fire and prepare the hut-shaped lodge for the ceremony. The ceremony includes silent blessings for each of the stones they add to the fire. Each part of this purification

ritual is performed “with prayer and attention,” Mitler says. “The singing in the lodge at the peak of suffering of the heat is transformational.”

As a group they also have attended Sufi, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu ceremonies, but they like to create their own rituals as a path to empowerment. Mitler says the human potential movement of the 1960s and 1970s influenced him in this direction. “It’s a way of facing fears and finding blocks in order to move through them to find deeper blocks. We like to ritualize as much as we can. We are interested in rituals that are alive.”

They’ve also experimented with different rituals in eating together, which have included eating in silence, feeding each other or moving in slow motion. “We experiment in the community to see what we can learn about ourselves under new conditions.” Other rituals have involved the senses and have included being blindfolded all day and spending a day in silence. “We want to see ourselves in extreme conditions. How far out can I go and what do I need in order to come back? We’re creating rocky waters.”

Out of some of these experiences, workshops emerge. When DZIECI invited the public to “Vow of Silence, a four-hour workshop during which no talking would be allowed, they had no idea what to expect. Their goal was to explore inner and outer silence, and, like all DZIECI workshops, they started with the theme and then followed the nature of the group participating, assisting to “moments of transformation.” The setting for “Vow of Silence” was a 16th floor rehearsal studio on Eighth Avenue in Manhattan. DZIECI members met their guests outside the room to inform them that the silence could not be broken. If they needed to talk to a member of the company, they should motion for the person to meet them outside. Mitler, who initially trained in humanistic and existential psychology and group process, was the facilitator, moving the afternoon from one thing to another with subtle gestures.

“One thing I like to have is a lot of waiting, but not in an anxious way like for a bus,” Mitler told the ensemble before guests arrived. Luckily the workshop participants seemed at ease with both the silence and the waiting, gathering in a circle at first to just stand still, with the only sound that of the whirring of the heating system. After several minutes, Mitler took a few steps to the side; others did the same. This was followed by head rolling and winging of arms until the movements began to flow in a circle. The silence was broken only by the sounds of knees cracking and heavy breathing as the pace quickened. The movements began to resemble a choreographed dance.

With the group thus unified, Mitler knelt on the floor, signaling the start of trust exercises in which ensemble members, and eventually guests, climbed on other’s shoulders, and were lifted to touch the ceiling, before falling backwards into the arms of the waiting group. One guest broke the silence at this point with a sigh of ecstasy when she landed safely. The session ended in a circle with a ritualized

meal, with a DZIECI member washing the guests' hands and another drying. Mitler motioned for people to begin feeding each other, which they did, before leaving in silence.

Outside the room, guests were eager to talk about their experience, but DZIECI members tried to help them control their energy. "It's our responsibility to assist the people we work with in maintaining this energy as long as possible," Mitler says. "We're not just there for a high experience. We assist a change of *being* so something can linger."

Mitler calls the workshops "active meditation for four hours," and likes to offer them shortly after a theatrical performance so theatre-goers have a chance to join DZIECI if they are interested. No one is ever asked to audition. "Your resume has very little value to me," Mitler says. "We trust that the right people will stay and add to the equation, but it is not easy."

Like Mitler, some DZIECI members had left show business for a time because they found it too ego-driven. To keep their egos in check, the performers never take a curtain call. "Applause breaks the spell the ritual casts," Mitler says, quoting an African proverb. "We all wish to do work of a spiritual nature. For various reasons, we find theatre is the best vehicle for us. We left because it wasn't fulfilling, yet we were pulled to something about it."

For Mitler, using ritual as a way of developing his art is the culmination of a religious journey that began when he was growing up in Newport, RI. He attended Hebrew classes three nights a week and studied the Old Testament on Sundays at Touro Synagogue, the oldest synagogue in America. Although Touro is orthodox, his family was not. They observed the holidays, but Mitler "never had a strong feeling about Judaism as a spiritual practice." He did, however, have a strong feeling for the rabbi, Theodore Lewis, who was from Ireland, and whose spiritual nature appealed to Mitler. "He had a strength of purpose, a generosity of spirit, and a vibrant presence. I've sought out people of that nature my whole life."

His searching led him to humanistic psychology, experimental theatre and Native American rituals. Then in Europe in the late 1970s, he learned about G.I. Gurdjieff's practice of integrating mind, heart and body to create a fourth "way" of development. He has been working on this now for nearly two decades, whether attending a formal religious service or in his own private practice. "I wish to use what I have to serve something higher."