

# Effie Best

-the life of a sociodramatist.

## Cher Williscroft

*Cher is a sociodramatist and TEP living in Nelson NZ. Currently she works with managers to develop personal and professional effectiveness, teaches sociodrama and psychodrama for various training institutes in NZ, and conducts Management Seminars on all aspects of leading people. She is Managing Director of her own company specialising in conflict management.*

At the ANZPA Inc. conference in Adelaide, in April 2005, I caught up with Effie Best, who is a role trainer and sociodramatist. Since the early days of my training as a sociodramatist, Effie has been a supportive colleague and I have been interested in her life as a sociodramatist, and curious about what experiences led her to becoming a sociodramatist. At Hahndorf, I had the perfect opportunity to interview her.

### ***What was the first time you recall using action methods?***

I was always a hands-on teacher. I was originally a biology teacher, and then I taught teachers in Teachers' College. I was even one of the writers of a famous biology text book that was used in schools for many years. That book included practical work and group learning as basic methodologies. Concretising concepts and learning in groups have been recurrent themes since I started teaching. I taught teachers to sit children in groups so they could learn from one another. That would be in the late 60s and early 70s.

In the 70s I was working in the Research Centre

of the Education Department, doing in-service education with teachers - Rob Brodie was part of the team. In 1975, at Rob's suggestion, I went to a workshop with Dale Herron called a Gestalt and Psychodrama Personal Growth Group - Reuben Sandler was also a leader. It was in the days of self development. I went because I was unhappy with my life. I was in a rut and felt starved of intimacy and I was painfully aware of all my faults. I thought I was sexually unattractive and too brainy etc. I was looking for integration and I came away from that workshop accepting that I was a fine person. From then on, I had a new identity - that I was lovable in all senses. More to the point, I thought '*wow that's a powerful way of teaching*', and being an inveterate teacher I wanted to know how to include it in my work and share it with others. Therefore, I immediately started to learn and apply what I had experienced.

### ***What were your earliest applications?***

I grasped the efficacy of role reversal early on. At that time we were assisting teachers to do evaluations of projects in a School Commission Programme, and it was important for them to



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relate to the person in charge of the program being evaluated. I would warm up a group of to the social role of 'evaluators' and Rob Brodie would warm up another group to the social role of 'the evaluated'. We would put them in pairs and ask them to interact and then to reverse roles. In another situation, I had the front desk people of a social agency reverse roles with the clients and with the social workers. The method was fun and effective. Those I worked with could feel something working - it was a hugely different experience for them from someone trying to tell them what to do in the situation.

***At what point did you decide to become a trainee?***

I went to one or two more workshops when Max started running psychodrama workshops. To be honest, some of my motivation came from being in love with another participant. I wasn't thinking of training but Tina Lee (Hucker) came across to South Australia and ran a workshop. It was lovely - she had us doing simple things like setting a scene and it was then I realised I could become a sociodrama director. I thought '*I can do this!*' In my mind, sociodrama was about teaching and educating. At that point, I started seriously doing training and worked with Zerka Moreno, Max Clayton, Tom Wilson, Warren Parry, Tina Lee-Hucker and Lynette Clayton. I traveled to Victoria, ACT, WA, and even did a week's sociometry workshop overseas with Ann Hale. In those days, a role trainer was a stepping stone to the next qualification. It took 400 hours plus a practical assessment. So I was initially assessed as a role trainer then later Tina Lee-Hucker became my primary trainer as a sociodramatist.

***Was there Training Institute in SA at that stage?***

There was no Training Institute in South Australia at that point. The South Australia Psychodrama Group was going already and I

joined it. We were all trainees: Rob Brodie, Ken Choularton, and Keith George - we trained each other, meeting one evening per week for practice. In my day job, Rob Brodie was influential and we used to concoct things with action methods to do with the teachers I was working with.

***What was happening to you professionally during this time?***

By the late 1970's I was working in the Education Dept with groups of teachers, and building up a reputation as '*Effie, who does all that interesting drama stuff*'. I recall setting out my first full system's drama in a workshop being run for the staff of an institution for crippled children at a professional development day. It was a communications workshop involving teachers, physiotherapists, social workers and care givers. I had been to a sociodrama workshop with Warren Parry in Victoria and I was a bit disappointed that when I finished the workshop with him I still didn't know how to work with the staff of an organisation. Then I thought of a basic principle - *start by setting out the system*. So, I just set out the system - with all the different groups, finding out as I went about how they interacted. I recall at one point in the drama there was a kid stuck in a swimming pool because one of her care givers had moved her wheelchair. We noticed how the different groups responsible for her care were acting independently and not communicating with each other. In setting out a system in a drama, you simply set it out according to how things are in real life. In doing so everyone can see themselves in the system and see each other at the same time. Everyone involved saw their own behaviour reflected in the drama and they went '*ah ha is that how I fit in?*' Setting out the system is a very powerful intervention, and a great starting point for almost any sociodrama. It is the mirroring that I love - people see how they fit in and relate - its like inter- group sociometry - and it helps groups understand themselves and each other.

***When were you assessed as a sociodramatist?***

It was after a conference of the Australia and NZ Science Education Research Association (ASERA), a very 'unstuffy' group but with no experience of psychodrama. I needed a group to work with so I invited those who were curious to come to a sociodrama session, which I would run. Tina Lee-Hucker and Max Clayton were the assessors. I did an off-the-cuff drama about teaching science. I completed the thesis later. It was about warming people up to learn in groups and it pulled together my early love of using learning groups with my newer understanding of the principles of sociometry and warm-up. I wrote about the importance of warming up learners to each other and to the learning task, and assisting them to make connections with each other in the context of the learning task. My answer to the old question of "Do you teach the student or the subject?" is "both, of course, simultaneously".

***Were you ever involved as a trainer?***

When a training institute was set up in South Australia, we called it the Psychodrama and Sociodrama Training Institute of South Australia, PASTISA. Rob Brodie, Keith George and I were staff and all contributed to planning and training. This later became PTISA in the same way as ANZPSSRT became ASERA. I particularly enjoyed working with people who wanted to use action in their workplace - I guess I was putting them in the kind of position that I was in when I first discovered psychodrama.

***What have been some of the highlights for you?***

In the mid 80's, I was in the research section of the Dept of Education and by then my reputation as an 'interesting producer' led me to run a workshop that was a highpoint of my life. The new Executive group of the Education Dept was supposed to be working co-operatively, and I was invited to lead a 3 day workshop to help these people become a team. Right near the

beginning, we put everything out on the stage - the students, the teachers, the school administration, the parents and the Education Department staff, administrators, advisers and, of course, the politicians. Then we noticed that the child, who had started out being central to the drama, had gone home and was doing school work by correspondence because no-one was interested in him. The group saw the point and they began to think about how they could work differently. It was a very good workshop and it was a turning point for me. I get delighted when I am working with a production and we all reach a point where the spontaneity flows and everyone goes 'ah ha' and you all know exactly what's happening now and it's new.

Another highlight was working with Aboriginal people at a conference of about 80 people. My main job was to organise them into working groups. We had a great time forming different groupings - we started by setting out a map of Australia, with people gathering according to 'where they came from'. This was a concretisation of an important element of the personal identity of most Aboriginal people and allowed participants to meet each other in ways that were both familiar and surprising. This led to a session where we played with different groupings including groups with similar work roles and groups of those who were now geographically close. We ended up using these as two sets of working groups; ideas that were generated in the 'similar work' groups were shared and refined in the 'now live near' groups. The result was resolutions from the conference that were practical and were later implemented.

***What are your reflections on ANZPA Inc?***

I have built friendships through ANZPA. I now have very old friends who visit me, and I love having people to share meals and reflect on our lives. I was briefly the Secretary of ANZPA Inc and I was very good at it. The Executive was

forming and Max Clayton had finished his term as President. We installed the two year term for executive members so they would stay on for longer and give more continuity. We also changed the voting system from a mail system to one where the voting occurred at the AGM.

I have seen huge shifts in ANZPA over time - the Association has grown and the culture is much easier. It used to be uncomfortable with a lot of criticism. In those days, there were a lot of trainees and a few practitioners and trainers, and so it was rife with authority issues. It took a long time for the first TEPs to come through. Francis Batten was the first practitioner (not a TEP) elected President.

The conference in Geelong was a turning point for the Association - it was a process of learning and maturing. I think the members started to take responsibility for developing the culture of the Association instead of complaining about it.

***What are your reflections on sociodrama now?***

It has expanded, become more diverse and has moved so it involves a lot more people and their own styles. When I started there was only Lynette Clayton, Warren Parry and Trish Williams doing sociodrama. Some of the initial sociodrama work was done by John Radecki (Woodcock) and Lynette Clayton who worked together to develop early Australian sociodrama.

We now have the notion of a sociodramatic question - it is a useful way of formulating the session in shared way. Sociodrama is now pleasing to me in that the purpose is shared, there is magic in what the director does but it's not a mystery. Participants aren't going home asking 'what is all this for and why are we doing this anyway?' The purpose is much clearer now.

***What are your hopes for the future of sociodrama?***

There are so many possibilities for applying psychodramatic methods in learning at all levels. I am particularly interested in the possibilities for professional training and development. Sociodrama and role training are wonderful means of both experiential learning and collaborative learning, including learning from each other. I hope that more teachers and educators learn to use these methods - I am not convinced that every educator should be a certified sociodramatist, but just imagine what the world would be like if there were one or two involved in the training of every teacher, medico, social worker, lawyer, psychologist...

*Effie is now officially retired and working on a housing development which is an eco city concept - a small inner city housing development with apartments, town houses and straw bale cottages. She is involved with ANZPA Inc. doing some examination of theses and assessment, and is on the newly formed Ethics Committee.*

