

Participatory theatre and mental health recovery: A narrative inquiry

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Abstract

Aims: To identify the potential relationship between participation in theatre and mental health recovery. To give voice to the stories told by participants of Teater Vildenvei, a theatre company that has been part of the rehabilitation programme for mental health service users in Oslo since 1995.

Methods: Twelve narrative interviews were conducted amongst participants of Teater Vildenvei and the data were subject to a narrative analysis process following the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and the specific methods of thematic, event and relational analysis as identified by Riessman.

Results: The narratives are considered in the theoretical light of the mental health recovery framework as identified by Leamy et al. Each participant had experienced a transformation in identity; the sense of belonging within the group was perceived as highly important to their mental health; engagement with the theatre company gives people something meaningful to do, a sense of hope and individuals feel empowered.

Conclusions: This narrative inquiry gave opportunity for participants to elaborate on their stories of their engagement with Teater Vildenvei. It is through the richness of the data, that the depth of the significance of meaning that people ascribe to their stories demonstrates the potential power of participatory theatre for mental health recovery. Because of its effects, people make life-changing and life-saving claims.

Key words

Arts, mental health, narrative, Norway, recovery, theatre

Introduction

This is a narrative inquiry focusing upon the stories told by participants of Teater Vildenvei, a theatre company that has been part of the rehabilitation programme for mental health service users for over twenty years in Oslo, Norway. As a methodology, narrative inquiry has been increasingly employed in health sector research,¹ although the potential for narrative research in Public Health is still being explored.² Furthermore, in Norway there has thus far been little attention given to exploring health narratives in the context of public health, let alone those of personal experience related to the participation in culture and health initiatives. The perspective of service users is therefore often lost in the discussions about the value of arts and health initiatives for the promotion of public health. Despite the fact that user involvement is a statutory right in Norway, research shows that users' voices are not sufficiently listened to.³ Narrative inquiry is therefore one way of enabling people's voices to be heard.

Teater Vildenvei can best be described as a community mental health theatre company working to promote mental health amongst participants with various mental health problems. The company does not work within an overtly therapeutic paradigm and the emphasis is not on working through personal issues to achieve psychological change, as it is in many forms of drama therapy.⁴ Instead the company is resource oriented and focuses on the health-promoting properties of collaborative theatre-making to produce positive change in people's lives. As such, Teater Vildenvei belongs to a long tradition of using theatre performance to enhance well-being and health.^{4,5,6} This tradition of theatre-making in the service of health and wellbeing is at least as old as the ancient Greek rituals performed in the Ascleipions⁷ and Aristotle's theory of dramatic catharsis, which acknowledged the therapeutic dimensions of drama/theatre and made links between the art of medicine and the art of theatre. With Aristotle, the idea that drama and theatre can enable emotional release, increase our sensitivity to others, bring people together and produce change in people's lives was firmly established.⁸ This belief has been repeated throughout the history of theatre studies.

In the past one hundred years, experimental theatre practitioners such as Artaud, Grotowski, Boal and Brooks have contributed greatly to our understanding of the healing aspects of dramatic and theatrical activities.⁹ In different ways, all these practitioners have highlighted that the processes of creativity, playing and acting are necessary for the maintenance of wellbeing both for individuals and societies.⁴ The early pioneers in drama and therapy as we now understand it, also shared this view. Being influenced by the experimental theatre of the day, the Russian theatre director Nikolai Evreinov (1879-1953), the Russian

psychiatrist Vladimir Iljine (dates unknown), and the creator of psychodrama, Jacob Moreno (1889-1974), all started experiments where they used theatre in attempts to cure illness and promote health. They all strongly believed in the curative and transformative power of the theatre and that acting could help people to expand their role potential, enabling people to play old, familiar roles in new and more healthy ways.⁴ Both Evreinov and Moreno believed that the actor's ailments could be overcome by the transformative power of the roles he/she enacted. Both also perceived spontaneity and creativity to be an important part of the maintenance of well-being and the return to health.^{4,10} These principles became key elements of Moreno's development of psychodrama as an alternative to psychotherapy in the 1920s and 1930s. According to Moreno, spontaneity and creativity were innate human qualities and that the loss of these qualities could produce illness and mental distress. Moreno defines spontaneity as 'a new response to an old situation or an adequate response to a new situation'.¹¹ Wilkins stress this importance of spontaneity in Moreno's theory by arguing that, "spontaneity and anxiety are opposites" (11).¹² He goes on to explain that "the more anxious a person is, the less spontaneous and the less likely they are to meet challenge and change in a healthy way" (11). The primary objective of psychodrama is thus to enhance the spontaneity of participants. Like Moreno, Augusto Boal (1931-2009) also used theatre for individual and social empowerment and to bring about change in people's lives. As founder of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed', Boal used participatory theatre to help people feel socially liberated. Whilst politically driven, his methods were meant to help people to see themselves and their situations in new ways, thus enabling them to become more empowered.^{12,13,14}

Today psychodrama, a number of different forms of dramatherapy and applied theatre in health practices are used in clinical and community settings to promote healing and health. Applied theatre has a long history in health and care. Practitioners/artists in this field are generally not therapists. They therefore use the term health rather than therapy when they refer to their mode of treating illness and promoting health through drama and theatre.⁷ Whilst respecting differences, it can also be fruitful to acknowledge that all theatre practices that aims to promote health tend to share a common understanding that theatre can enable emotional release and effect powerful change in how people see themselves and their situations and how they relate to others.

As this short overview shows, theatre has a long history in health care and the health benefits of participating in performance-based theatre activity are discussed in a growing number of studies.^{5,6,15,16,17,18} For those studies available, work with older people has proven beneficial.^{19,20,21,22,23} Theatre has also been used to specifically promote empowerment and

mental health recovery,^{5, 6, 24, 25} but generally there has been little emphasis on researching the effects of applied theatre and health practices.^{18, 26} This study seeks to find out more about the potential relationship between participating in a theatre company and participants accounts of their own mental health. To understand the context of this study, we will first present a potted history of the theatre.

The History of Teater Vildenvei

Teater Vildenvei is a semi-professional theatre company open to mental health service users and their allies. The theatre was formed in 1995 by Eduard Myska, a Czech born, Norwegian director who gained his professional training in Poland where he also worked as a director in mainstream theatre for eight years. From 1975 to 1995 Eduard worked both full-time and part-time as a mental health assistant in Oslo, and when he returned to Norway permanently in 1994, he had the passion, knowledge and qualifications needed to initiate a successful theatre company that would promote health. Today Myska is employed by Oslo University Hospital, but the theatre can best be described as a community mental health service/activity. The theatre company is recognised as an important service for mental health users in the region and it has gained recognition from both the health and the culture sectors, winning a number of health and culture awards and prizes. This is the first research study to examine its effectiveness.

Teater Vildenvei identifies four aims that underpin their practice; they are summarised as follows:

- To produce high-quality theatre that appeals to large sections of society.
- To improve the health and well-being of participants through the medium of theatre.
- To enhance values of equity and social justice in the field of art by enabling marginalised voices to be heard.
- To create dialogue between mental health service users and the larger community in order to reduce stigma and counter negative stereotypes towards people with mental health problems.²⁷

Teater Vildenvei has over thirty productions to its credit. Taken together, the plays performed by Teater Vildenvei have addressed a range of issues and include plays for both children and adults. The plays performed include pieces written by established national and international playwrights, musicals written especially for the company and group-devised performances. As a general rule, the company does not address personal issues in their plays. Over the years, the

company has had between 15 and 30 members at any one time; over 100 people have performed in a Teater Vildenvei play. Today there are about 15 actors in the company, their ages range from 30 to 82. Membership is not limited to mental health service users, mental health professionals and professional actors have also been part of the group. Together they have worked to produce plays in a wide range of venues including psychiatric wards, day centres, mainstream theatre, conferences, schools and churches in and around Oslo. The group has also toured with their plays, visiting theatres in Poland (Łódź), the Czech Republic (Prague) and Ireland (Galway). In the spring of 2018, the theatre will tour to Tromsø in the Northern part of Norway.

Aims

Because of the uniqueness of this project and the opportunity to explore its efficacy according to participants, the aim of the research was to identify the potential relationship between participation in theatre and mental health recovery and to give voice to the stories told by participants of Teater Vildenvei.

Method

All the actors in Teater Vildenvei was asked to participate in the study. Twelve of the fifteen current members volunteered to participate in the research, each were or had been using mental health services. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Each participant also gave written, informed consent prior to taking part in the study. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the project at any stage.

The methodology for the research is narrative inquiry and emphasis is given to the stories that are individually and collectively constructed and recounted by the participants. Narrative interviews were conducted in the spring and summer of 2016. Actors were asked to share their experiences of being involved in the theatre group and were encouraged to tell stories about their experiences. As such, there was no fixed interview schedule. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours; they were recorded, transcribed, translated into English and the stories were subject to a narrative analysis following Ricoeur and Riessman, incorporating thematic, event and relational analysis.^{28, 29, 30, 31, 32} Firstly, the researcher who conducted the interviews checked against the digital recordings for accuracy and any necessary amendments were made, including anonymising any names of other participants. Reflections were made drawing upon the interviewers subjective and personal experiences of each interview. The texts were then re-read from a critical standpoint. General themes and recurring ideas relating to

event and relationships were then noted for a further detailed, critical analysis. The main themes, events and relationships from the interviews were agreed by the researchers and summarised into vignettes, four of which are presented in this article. All names and identifying factors have been changed to maintain anonymity.

Results

All the participants narrated positive stories about their involvement in the theatre group. The actors interviewed have all been part of Teater Vildenvei for a number of years (from 2-20 years). We do not know the views of those who have chosen to leave the theatre group and we acknowledge they may give contrasting narratives.

Broadly speaking, two types of narratives can be identified based on the interview material. All the narratives describe enhancing the well-being of the participants in some fundamental way. In these narratives, the participants describe how Teater Vildenvei has improved their well-being by giving them something meaningful to do, social contact, peer support and improved self-esteem. Six of the narratives describe a personal transformation attributed to their involvement in the theatre. As narrative researchers we had a choice whether to present the results from the analysis of all twelve interviews or (as we have chosen in this short article) to present a potentially richer picture by focusing on the narratives of a smaller number to illustrate the potentially transformative effects of participating in theatre for mental health.

Elida: A recovery narrative about gaining a voice, confidence and self-worth

Elida is a woman in her seventies; she has a long history of mental health problems and for ten years she was a 'revolving door patient' at a psychiatric ward in Oslo. For much of this time she was hospitalised. Elida became involved in the theatre group in 1998. She did not have much theatre experience when she started, but she has always wanted to become an actress. She recalls being ridiculed by people in her home-town when she revealed her ambition. Joining the theatre group was, therefore, an opportunity to fulfil this ambition and to develop a new, positive identity.

Elida narrates a very powerful story about the ways in which Teater Vildenvei has helped her to gain a voice, confidence, self-worth and social belonging. On the most basic level, Elida constructs a story where she describes and shows (performs) how she is transformed through the theatre:

I came almost without a voice. I had a very poor voice. Almost so that they did not hear me, whispering, whispering...

Elida performs this memory with her voice and with her body, trying to make herself as small as she can. She describes herself as someone who wanted to take as little space in the world as possible. She claims ‘*I did not want to be seen or heard*’. Participating in Teater Vildenvei has changed this. And it is evident that she wants to demonstrate this through her story. Elida maintains that the theatre has been extremely good for her because it has forced her to actively fight her desire to become invisible and inaudible:

It is very good for me that I have been given this opportunity because in reality I am quite modest and anxious. I have lacked self-confidence, which has meant that I did not want to be seen or heard. This is not an option in the theatre, because here you must be both heard and seen.

Through the theatre, Elida has thus been ‘forced’ to develop a more confident voice and a more confident presence in the world: “*Not that I have a great voice now, but I have to use it*”. Elida’s transformation did not happen overnight. When she started in Teater Vildenvei she played roles that did not require her to talk. After a number of silent roles, she eventually felt adequately empowered to accept a talking role which required much coaching and support from the director and other group members. The role she was given was Mrs. Meadow in Nell Dunn’s *Steaming*. As part of this play, Mrs. Meadow had to raise her voice and scream: ‘SHUT UP’ to her daughter. Elida had never dared to raise her voice in her life, and doing so in front of an audience, in a public space, was something she perceived to be an impossibility prior to this challenge. When she finally dared to do it after many rehearsals, it became one of her life’s great victories. It also becomes the turning point in Elida’s story – the beginning of a new and more confident identity. Elida thoroughly enjoyed playing this tough woman and she claims that she gained confidence through the process. According to Elida she has been able to develop a strong and positive identity by participating in the theatre:

I have become confident and I dare to be myself. [...] I have become stronger, and I have gained a stronger voice. I dare to stand up for what I mean. [...] I did not do that before. I did not dare to say anything. Because I did not think that my opinions were any good. I have learned to be stronger and more assured that I am OK, or good enough.

Elida's story is a strong testimony about how the theatre has helped her to revalue her sense of self and her self-worth. This is the main story she wants to tell.

Elida has become very emotionally attached to the group. She now considers the group to be "closer than family", "almost like a family of brothers and sisters". She shows much concern for this family and does everything in her power to make everyone feel well. Elida is proud of her story.

I don't hide that I have had mental health problems and that my mum suffered from mental illness and that I have a brother who is mentally ill. I don't want to hide it. It is our history.

Elida can therefore also be proud of her identity. Teater Vildenvei has helped her to appreciate her story and her identity. Elida describes participating in Teater Vildenvei as life changing. The theatre has helped her to reconsider her past histories and to see herself in a new light.

William: A recovery narrative about gaining confidence and finding a voice

William is a male in his thirties. He describes himself as a person who struggles with social anxiety. William was a patient at a District Psychiatric Centre in Oslo when he was first introduced to Teater Vildenvei in 2005. He chose to join the theatre as a strategy to confront his social anxiety. He describes this as a brave choice that has had a transformative effect on his life. William narrates a "before and after" story to describe how important the theatre has been for him.

Before I started in the theatre group I was very insecure. I had low self-confidence and wasn't especially social.

This has changed as a result of his joining the theatre. According to William, it has enabled him to become more secure in himself. It has also enabled him to confront his social anxiety and to socialise with others.

I meet people. Otherwise I am often alone during my spare time. In a way, it is a leisure activity at the same time as it therapy for me.

Talking to other people has never been my strong side. So, by performing I become more secure. Because then I play another role than I do normally.

Performing in front of others has made it easier for him to talk to those outside the theatre. As he says: *“I talk more now. I am not as silent as I was before”*. This has influenced his friendships, his connection with others and his identity. William does not think that he would have been where he is today if it had not been for the theatre.

It would have been more difficult for me to tackle my anxiety if I hadn't been part of the theatre. So I don't think I would have been so secure. I doubt it.

William claims that he becomes very motivated when playing theatre and he loves to perform in front of an audience. He describes the applause after a performance as a magic experience that gives him both optimism, self-confidence and courage to be more active. For William motivation thus inspired hope and reduced inactivity, which he associated with improved mental wellbeing and decreased mental distress.

Belonging to the theatre group is very important for William. *“I have been part of it for such a long time that it gives me an identity”*. William also perceives the group to be like a family: *“We are a close-knit group. [...] And we help each other back stage. So we are like a family.*

Nora: A recovery narrative of love and social belonging

Nora is a woman in her eighties. She has been part of the theatre group for 16 years after she had been injured badly in a bicycle accident. After the accident, she became involved in a number of activities run by the District Psychiatric Service in her neighbourhood. Nora recalls that she was very nervous when she started in the theatre group. She had never engaged in theatre before and she did not think that she had any talent in that direction. She describes that she was received very well and she soon felt that she had become a valued member of a group for the first time in her life. Now Nora loves participating in Teater Vildenvei and the theatre activity has become a significant part of her life.

Throughout the interview, Nora refers to all the sad things she has experienced in her life; physical and psychological abuse, the birth of a stillborn daughter, her subsequent depression and her social isolation. For Nora, Teater Vildenvei represents everything that is

good in her life and she considers the theatre as a positive antidote to all the traumatic and sad experiences that she has had in her life:

It has been so much unhappiness, so therefore I think: I have this theatre group and what should I have done without it?

... the theatre group has been my salvation. I would say that. So if I had not had that, I would have been destroyed. I would, because there has been so much sadness in my family.

There are many things in my life that is not enjoyable, but the theatre group is enjoyable.

Nora has twice attempted to end her own life. The last time she swallowed so many tranquilisers that it would have killed her had she not been rushed to the hospital where her life was saved. Reflecting back on this incident, she says:

That was quite a pity [laughter], because I have experienced so many sad things after that. But then I would not have been in the theatre group.

Nora constructs a story about Teater Vildenvei where coming to the theatre has been a salvation. There are many reasons for this; firstly, she is experiencing respect and feels that she has something to contribute. This feeling has not previously existed in Nora's life. As a child she was beaten regularly and she was constantly told that she was stupid and worthless. Now she is valued and respected and she knows that she can say things without being criticised. Nora claims to have increased her self-worth and her confidence has grown considerably after she joined Teater Vildenvei:

I have more confidence and self-esteem, but it is maybe because I don't care so much anymore. As a young woman I did not dare to talk to everyone ... even though I really wanted to. Now I talk to everyone no matter what. And that is a benefit that comes with age. And I think that this has much to do with the fact that I came to this theatre group, that I can stand on stage and make a fool of myself [Laughter].

Thirdly and most importantly for Nora, Teater Vildenvei has given her friendships and social belonging. She reflects that the theatre has prevented her from being isolated and alone.

I am participating because the social aspect is so good. It is a loving environment. I have been given the opportunity to travel to places that I otherwise would not have come to.

Teater Vildenvei has changed Nora's life and she claims that she has a much better life than she had before. It gives her much joy and she is looking forward to meeting everyone on Tuesdays. Belonging to a group and being part of group with others who also struggle with similar problems has been important for Nora. It gives her a mission and a place in society. This activity is so important that it is difficult for her to imagine herself or life itself without the theatre group. For her, the theatre has become a reason to live:

As long as I have this I will keep up fairly well. I have this theatre group that makes life worth living.

Aline: A recovery narrative about finding hope and belonging

Aline is a woman in her late sixties. She has been a member of the theatre group since 2002. At that time in her life she was depressed, exhausted and burned out. She was a patient at the District Psychiatric Service in her neighbourhood when she started in the theatre group. When she became ill she was encouraged to take medication, but she refused, which excluded her from the traditional therapies. Instead she engaged with various activities at the Centre; she began to learn how to play the guitar, to sing in a choir and then joined the theatre group. Her narrative is about how Teater Vildenvei has helped her to master her life and to recover from her depression. To tell this story, Aline returns to three dominant themes: social belonging / networks, increased self-esteem and the importance of creativity.

Aline labels herself as an introvert person. When she became ill and no longer could work, this aspect of her personality became very noticeable, and for the most part she wanted to hide and not see anyone. Her favourite activity was to lay on the sofa, staring into the ceiling. In the theatre group, she could not hide. Indeed, she became very visible, and according to her GP, this was the beginning of her recovery:

My GP claims that it was the best that could have happened to me, that I dared to be visible. She soon saw improvements (recovery). That I did not cry so much anymore and that I talked with enthusiasm about the play we were working on. I had become less self-centred. Because I had something to go to, a fixed point in my life. When I was on sickness benefits, I was spending a lot of time on my own and that is not always so good.

For Aline, the theatre became a place where she found social belonging and a network of friends. She talks about the group with great affection and feels supported in the group. She trusts others in the group and feels that they support her and do not judge her. The group has become a central component of her social life.

I have become so fond of the people. [...] We keep our fingers crossed for each other and see it when people struggle. I feel a lot of solidarity in the group.

I feel that we wish each other very well. That we are small flowers that wander around the globe and that we all are struggling with something.

Aline also feels that she has changed as a person as a result of her involvement with the theatre group. She is afraid of sounding too confident, and she admits that Jante's Law dictates her life (The law of Jante is commonly found in Scandinavian culture that negatively portrays and censures individual success and achievement as valueless and somehow wrong):

It has given me greater self-esteem. Not that I have a very high self-concept, but I have gained more self-confidence.

I believe that I am a deal happier now than when I started. Because I have something to go to and I have some people that I am friends with. I think we are brave.

Having something concrete and meaningful to do has been very significant for Aline. In the beginning this was particularly important. She recalls how she mastered her depression through

her creative practice because it kept her occupied, it gave her something to look forward to and the roles she played gave her new insight and new ways of understanding herself.

In the beginning I had quite a lot of lines. So I had to learn them by heart. And I was looking forward to every Tuesday when we were meeting. [...] I was learning my lines, right. And when you are doing the dishes, to have the note on the wall to rehearse your lines.

Aline is very explicit about how the theatre gave her hope. In her narrative, she describes the theatre as a ladder that helped her climb out of her hole in the ground; a ladder back into society and work. Teater Vildenvei has given Aline a place in the world; a place where she feels valued and accepted and importantly, the theatre has given her a role to fulfil.

Discussion

We now present a discussion of the findings from these narratives in the light of the recovery framework identified by Leamy et al.,³³ doing this we can consider to what extent, engagement in a community-based theatre company might facilitate an individual's recovery journey and consider the implications for public mental health.

Leamy et al.¹⁷ conducted a systematic modified narrative synthesis in order to establish an empirically-based conceptual framework for recovery from mental illness. Having identified 5,208 papers and reviewed 366, 97 papers were finally included in the review. From this review they were able to identify five recovery processes (which form the acronym CHIME): connectedness, hope and optimism, identity, meaning in life and empowerment. Significantly, these processes may be allied to theories of change.

Each of the four narrators in the present study allude to personal change they experienced by attending Teater Vildenvei. When they were asked to tell why and how they became involved in the theatre, they refer to this engagement as life-changing. Much of this change is associated with individuals' ability to respond to old situations and new challenges in healthy ways, something Moreno associated with greater spontaneity.¹¹ All four participants claim that they have increased their confidence to relate to others through their participation in the theatre. They also admit that they have a much healthier self-image now than when they started in the theatre group. Significantly, they each refer to the person who started attending years previously as a very different person to the person they are now. Recalling this "former" self, they all describe this person as lacking self-esteem and self-confidence. They all describe

themselves as passive, isolated individuals who felt inhibited and unable to act. In their stories, this passive individual is transformed through the theatre because here they are given the opportunity to come together, be active and to play roles that enable them to see themselves differently and to redefine themselves in more positive and healthy ways. All the narrators in this study claim that they have made positive changes in their lives as a direct result of the characters they have played on stage. One actor recalls that she learned how to raise her voice and be more assertive, something she had struggled with in real life. Another stressed that playing confident characters on stage had made him more confident in real life. Stepping into another person's shoes was also associated with an ability to emphatically identify with others and greater self-insight. In all these ways, the narratives demonstrate the important connection between enactment and the creation of change that has been identified by theory and practice in theatre and therapy.^{4, 34, 35}

The dramaturgical model of the self, suggesting that our identities and selves are creations and that we always can create ourselves differently, underpins both drama therapy and applied theatre in health practices.^{4, 12, 36} The stories told by the participants confirm this theory. In short it can be said that they have found a powerful form of self-expression and experienced a transformation in identity. In Goffman's theory³⁷ of 'spoiled identities', people's identities become spoiled by society. It has been postulated that the effects of stigmatisation and discrimination might be more difficult to cope with than mental health problems per se.³⁸ By creating a new identity as "actor" the participants transform themselves from a negative identity ("mental patient") to a positive identity as an actor. In so doing with others, a social identity emerges and collectively people with mental health problems can find a social answer to a social problem through re-defining themselves as artists and restore their identities.³⁹ Furthermore, acting, according to Boal enables the actor to bring about change through the process of acting that change.¹²

Feeling "connected" and building strong social relations are at times, challenging for people with mental health issues.^{40, 41, 42} Despite this, the theme of "connectedness" and belonging is strongly present in the narratives. All the participants feel a great sense of belonging to the theatre company. Participants describe this sense of belonging as essential for their recovery and they draw a direct link between their health and wellbeing and their membership in the theatre company. They all feel valued and part of a group that accepts them for who they are. Everyone described this as being unique in their lives and prior to the engagement with the company they all, in different ways, doubted their ability to be an accepted and valued member of any group.

One of the main priorities of the theatre director is to create group cohesion and belonging through the building of a strong theatre company. Understanding how important predictability is for the participants, the director never cancels a rehearsal. All the participants spoke of the importance of the regularity of the meetings, emphasising how much they were looking forward to the rehearsal each Tuesday. For many of the participants the meeting with the group is a weekly ritual. The rehearsal always starts with coffee and small-talk where the group greets and hugs and inquire about the health of the other participants. This ritual has fostered strong bonds between the participants. They refer to the group as family, and for some even closer than family. Participating in producing public performances greatly enhances this sense of connectedness and social belonging. Actors feel that they are valued members of the group because they play an important role in the production. One actor articulates this particularly clearly: “I can’t jump into the ocean when we have a premier in a month. I can’t let the others down”. Significantly, each have found a profound sense of self-worth and belonging through their contribution to the theatre.

All the participants tell stories about how much they appreciate the opportunity of participating in meaningful activity. Most of the actors argue that participation in Teater Vildenevi has had greater impact on them than other activities because they perform theatre in the public sphere and because they all feel responsible for the success of the performance, something that they describe as very meaningful. Feeling that they have produced something that is appreciated by an audience is also described as very meaningful. As Emunah and Johnson argue, the transformative power of the stage performance is great because the participants present themselves in new ways: “They make the audience laugh, cry, reflect; they have power. They are actors, not spectators; activators, not victims. Their strengths are apparent; their symptoms are much less visible than usual” (236).⁵ Having this opportunity to contribute positively to public life has been very significant for the participants and everyone claim that the process of public performance has given them pride, hope and better self-esteem.

Furthermore, the fulfilment and enjoyment people experience in the theatre, and the transformation of role and identity in turn gives people hope and optimism. Spandler et al., refer to this phenomenon as a “life-saving force”.⁴³ Given the high incidence of suicide amongst people with a diagnosis of mental illness, it is evident from the narratives that participating in theatre may indeed become life-saving for people. These findings resonate with Boal who regards theatre as empowering by giving voice, creating dialogue and enjoyment.¹²

This study illustrates how engagement in community-based theatre can have a significant positive impact upon the lives of people with a diagnosis of mental illness. For those

involved, this particular theatre activity supports all five recovery processes identified by Leamy et al.: connectedness, hope and optimism, identity, meaning in life and empowerment. In terms of operationalising such initiatives, there has emerged in recent years a framework that is holistic enough to accommodate such artistic approaches in public health and that is the concept of social prescribing. From community choirs to knitting groups or gardening, there are emerging contemporary models of health promotion that are generally non-medical and non-technical. Teater Vildenvei is one such example. This model is not sufficiently explored, especially in Norwegian contexts, but given the potentially powerful positive effects such initiatives can provide, we may be witnessing the emergence of a new and transformatory public health model for the future based on the ancient wisdom that theatre can heal and restore health.

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