

**<sup>1</sup>Leelah – Play for Itself**  
**An Undirected Model of Drama Therapy**  
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**Preface – My Life's Play**

"A man's maturity: that is to have rediscovered the seriousness he possessed as a child at play."  
(Nietzsche, 1886, *Beyond Good and Evil*)

My connection to play started as with most of us: in role playing as a young child. In the 1980s, during the great economic crisis, when I was nine years old, my family moved from Givatayim to a new building in Rehovot. Like many other businessmen at the time, the contractor declared bankruptcy in the middle of construction. The first few stories of the building remained skeletal, and the building resembled a construction site; scattered bricks, boards, mounds of sea sand, half walls, abandoned personal belongings of construction workers, and plenty of construction materials were part of the local scenery. This abandoned construction site was a fertile, adventurous ground for us, the neighborhood kids. My childhood is filled with magical memories of that time when we would split into camps of knights, entrench ourselves in the stories of the building, build accessorized forts out of the many materials, dress up with the workers' clothes, and go on missions intended to occupy the castle on the next floor up. I have no words to describe the intoxicating sense of joy and superb satisfaction that overtook me after every such adventure. Even today, as a father, when I walk with my children and see a house being built, I invite them in to tour the maze of rooms and feel my imagination soar by itself without my control.

As a young man, I was active in the local youth theatre, a unique place for developing acting skills that was very devoted to us as actors; a place that, among other things, gave us legitimate permission to skip school for rehearsals. At the theatre, we put up shows such as *Spring Awakening*, *What is Love*, and others. We performed often at schools and for the public. The feeling of performing in front of an audience, after long and deep processes, was very empowering and meaningful. Still, there on the stage, I could not experience the same sense of intoxicating, endless freedom I experienced as a child in spontaneous play.

As I got older, I discovered the game *Dungeons & Dragons*, in which I participated a player and as Dungeon Master. This game that takes place without an audience allowed me to connect to my inner self. Luckily, once again I found a haven, an ideal space for self-expression. The Saga was a game I particularly liked. The Saga is live role playing, also known as RD&D, a theatrical game held once a year, in a defined area outdoors, for two days. It includes massive battles, sieges on towns, skullduggery and trickery, life in a fantasy world. The game has a storyline, including laws and rules. Part of the uniqueness of the game is that the player remains in character throughout it without interruption; and so, we ate, brushed our teeth, went to bed, woke up, and achieved goals without stepping out of our characters. The plot, created

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<sup>1</sup> The following text is a translation of the first part of an article from the book:  
Blum-Yazdi, D. (2014). *Leelah - a play for itself: an undirected model of drama therapy*. In Berger, R. (editor), *Creation - The therapy heart* (p. 67-95). KriyatBialic: ahch.

spontaneously by the players, goes on into infinity, soaring on the wings of imagination, filling the bag with wisdom, the heart with love and the sound chords with singing. Although there were no therapeutic intentions in the game, I found the drama in it healing for itself.

Today I work with my love – with play – and believe wholeheartedly in the forces of empowerment and self-healing that exist in it. Following Winnicott (1995), I discovered that play is not something that takes place until the therapeutic work becomes serious and then should be stopped, but rather that the entire course of therapy is connected intensely to the foundation of play. Playing is connecting spontaneously to the true self, the treasure of thoughts, memories, associations, and feelings inside every one of us. It contains natural qualities of healing and growth. The model I present in this article, Leelah – play for itself, is an applied model based on work inside a storyline. The story creates a working space that is entirely within a playful existence. The process occurs using role play and free-form play, guided from a position of joining but not intervening.

### **Introduction**

The model presented in this article is a theoretical application of a theory named The Play Paradigm (Blum-Yazdi, 2013). I have observed over the years that most of the Art Therapy methods are based on psychological and psychoanalytical theories. The **Play Paradigm** is a unique theory, which relies on art-based research, that supports the field of Art Therapy and treatments which use play. The theoretical basis of this Paradigm is interdisciplinary. It is based on a dialogue between philosophers who focus on play, such as Huizinga, Goffman, Gadamer; and psychoanalysts who focus on play, such as Klein, Erikson and Winnicott.

The Paradigm has three main pillars: The first defines the power relationships between therapist and client. The second defines the freedom of the individual playing in therapy. The third defines the identity of the one who plays in therapy. The research methodology for these three pillars is based on the concepts of Michel Foucault. The principles of the Playing Paradigm may be applied in various ways. One of them is the model "Leelah – for Itself". This is a recommended way to undergo the therapeutic path.

The research was based, among else, on clinical experience, on the game Dungeons & Dragons, and on possible applications of the laws of new physical theories that correspond with ancient traditional theories (Blum-Yazdi, 2009). This research examined five groups of children that played Dungeons & Dragons over the course of a year. The research recorded the playful activity, the group dynamic, and personal development. The play space was treated in the research in reference to the Winnicottian transitional space and to the Dramatic Reality as defined by Pendzik (2006).

There is truth in the claim made by Pendzik that drama therapy invariably occurs inside a Dramatic Reality and that therapeutic intervention is always part of it, even when the intervention is meant for amusement only. "Teaching someone how to create

a dramatic reality is intervention for itself" (Pendzik, 278). Nonetheless, this introduction seeks to define different levels of intervention and interpretation and therefore to locate this current model in relation to other models and theories that use play in therapy. Thus, we will create an imaginary spectrum of the level of intervention of the therapist. The level of intervention on the spectrum will be determined by the level of involvement and presence in the drama, the amount of interpretation, as well as the level at which the play is performed purposively. At one end of the spectrum will be theories in which the therapist holds a dominant place, where he intervenes and interprets in a tendentious manner, and where play serves a specific purpose. At the other end, will be models in which the therapist is located in the background, his interpretation accompanies the patient, he allows for natural processes, and where play occurs spontaneously and for its own sake.

*Tendentious interpretation* is defined in this article as a clever action, performed by the therapist, which affects the patient directly or indirectly in order to lead to structural and perceptual changes in his world view or personality. This action bypasses protective factors; it is done either openly or discreetly, for the sake of therapeutic intervention, and can be done verbally or through play. *Accompanying interpretation* is defined as an action that allows the patient to develop in his own unique way, and out of acceptance of his world view and personality structure. Therefore, this action will not be concrete and focused, but rather wide and dynamic. It will reflect in the play itself, respecting protective factors and using a minimal level of therapeutic intervention.

An example of models and theories wherein the therapist is very dominant, intervening and interpreting tendentiously, is the classic Kleinian theory. Klein claimed that the status of play is equivalent to that of free associations that represent the subconscious; therefore, she used to interpret playful activities for the child: "in his symbolic play... the child expressed his oedipal conflicts and conflicts regarding his bisexuality. Death wishes toward his parents and little brother... [were observed] as he dropped the toys in rage..." (Segal, 1998, p.17). Similarly, "Johnson describes the Developmental Transformations (DvT) Model as an ongoing flow of inner awareness and imagination, used as a technique to bring up free associations. This form of therapy exists in the improvised play space when the therapist is in the actor position and the patient is the 'text'. The role of the therapist is to maintain the play space and make interventions within it, which refer to the things that come out of the patient unlike Klein, there will always remain a gap between imagination and reality, and all interventions will be made inside the play space" (Ben Ami and Zehavi, 2013, personal correspondence). In my understanding, these interventions will refer to the subconscious and will be hidden from sight since they will occur under the cover of a role. Classical Psychodrama is also characterized by prominent presence and intervention of the therapist. In this technique, spontaneous play can occur after the therapist was able to bypass the protective factors of the patient: "the psychodramatist chooses the protagonist, encourages him to expose himself, to overcome his resistance... he is in charge of navigating the psychodrama..." (Naharin, p. 22).

An example of the use of play as a means to an end but with more subtle interventions can be found in the book *The Healing Forest*, in the plan 'safe place' by

Berger and Lahad. The plan is intended to develop and enrich strength and coping resources (Berger and Lahad, 2010, p.26), therefore it is goal oriented.

While according to psychoanalytic theory, child play is similar to free associations and it opens a window to the subconscious part of the soul, according to humanistic theories, play is an expression of the authentic potential of the child – his true self. An example of the theories and models wherein the transitional space stands on its own, where the therapist is perceived as allowing, intervenes minimally, and uses accompanying interpretation, is Lacanian Psychoanalysis. In this method, the purpose of therapy is not the removal of troublesome symptoms, but the identification of the patient with them (Lacan, 2005). From this, it can be derived that the role of the analyst is to allow the patient to perform the process of analysis himself and therefore the patient is called analysand. Additionally, this form of psychoanalysis values resistance. Lacanian interpretation can therefore be vague and inaccurate by way of not fitting the "facts", and yet real by way of having powerful metaphorical results (Lacan, 1992). Similarly, Jennings (1994) claims that we should often attach to the metaphorical expressions made by the patient and not force control by interpreting them. "Our need to explain and interpret is related in most cases to our feelings of anxiety rather than those of the patient" (Jennings, p.37). we should stay with not knowing and allow meaning to be discovered with time.

Analyzing the story and interpreting the inner, symbolic material of the patient are not part of the role of the drama therapist. This is a claim made by Sesame method, a British method for therapy through drama and movement (1996). Like Jennings, the heart of this method is metaphorical work. One of the manners of work is play an inner character, who takes on a role in the story. In therapy, the patient examines the ways in which the character copes with life. This method does not intervene and is based on a basic assumption that difficulties are resolved through distancing and indirectly. The process of integration and healing occurs over time by itself.

Thus, the therapeutic approach of Carl Rogers (2008) assumes that man is the biggest expert in himself and is able to find solutions to his problems. The role of the therapist is to allow the natural expression of the patient and the only intervention is made by repeating his words. According to Rogers, one of the prominent qualities of the therapist is complete acceptance of the patient as he is and the ability of the therapist to be real, unmasked. The humanistic approach of Axline (1964) to play therapy is based on Rogers. According to Axline, the therapist does not interpret but allows space and mirrors the behavior of the child. Some of the basic principles of play therapy according to Axline are: accepting the child for who he is; not directing the behavior of the child; the therapist does not attempt to advance therapy; the therapist determines only the necessary boundaries for anchoring the therapy in reality and passes the responsibility on the relationship to the child.

Additional foundations for this mode can be found with the philosopher Huizinga. In his book, *Homo Ludens* (1998), he claims that observing the phenomenon of play shows that play is first and foremost a free activity that serves no purpose, neither by nature nor by society. The only cause of play is pleasure which it brings to the person involved in it. According to Stuart Brown (1998), a pioneer researcher of

play, play is the result of curiosity and exploration, it exists solely in the present and with no future goal. Considering these ideas, the model Leelah – play for itself, can be placed at the edge of the spectrum where the interventions made by the therapist are minimal and play is not used as a tool to perform intervention. The goal of therapy is to create a playful space which is healing for itself. In this model, play can occur only when it has no purpose outside of itself. When purpose becomes more important than play, it probably is not play at all.

### **Presenting the Model "Leelah – Play for Itself"**

*In one of their journeys, the king of Afghanistan, his wife Leelah (playfulness), and the members of their court stopped at a remote and plain inn in the town of Harat, looking to quench their thirst, water their horses, and rest their bodies. The owner of the inn, it seemed, was one of Leelah's suitors in her youth, before she consented to the king's courtship. "Well, my love," the king smiled at his queen as they rode off. "If you had stayed with him, you would now be the partner of a remote inn's owner." "My darling," replied the queen, "had I consented to his courtship, he would be king now."*

The basis of the model of drama therapy, *Leelah – Play for Itself*, is an undirected role play, combining the laws of new physical theories (quantum theory, complexity theory, etc.) that correspond with Eastern traditional theories, and classical psychological theories. The model suggests a therapeutic process that performs accompanying interpretation and that does not include concrete and specific insights into life. This outlook comes from the belief that the unknown is greater than what is known and that a Western mechanistic view, for itself, misses the uniqueness of therapy, making it into a process of educational socialization while exerting power. The creation of this model was inspired by the game Dungeons & Dragons. It wishes to create a paradoxical situation: allowing play, conducted in the present in its 'suchness'<sup>2</sup> and with no viewers, thus with no goals or aspirations to acquire anything outside of it; but at the same time, the play is conducted in order to allow development and growth within the social framework I which we live.

The model "Leelah – Play for Itself" exists within a storyline in which the actors portray set characters<sup>3</sup>. The actor-therapist creates the general initial story, which provides the general framework and the rules, while the rest of the plot is devised interactively by the characters that develop during play. According to this method, everyone who is present participate and there is no witness of an audience or a therapist who are outside of the play. The therapeutic process echoes in the lives of the actors independently and naturally, with no analysis or tendentious interpretation of the story and the role.

The manner of working through a role and storyline was inspired by the game Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). Role playing games started becoming popular in the 1970s and D&D was the dominant among them. The game is based on a series of rule books that represents a defined, predetermined set of rules. The course of the plot

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'suchness', Tathātā in Sanskrit; refers in this article to things in their simplicity, as they are to themselves.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, the terms 'role' and 'character' bear the same meaning.

develops in the fictional world defined by the rules of the game. This world is open and unpredictable, since the actions of each character depend on willful decisions of the actor as well as on random components (such as a role of the dice which determines which of two equal warriors win a battle conducted between them); additionally, since all the various characters exist in the same world, a complex system is created: the decisions of each character affect the others. Therefore, the plot of the game is a complex, collective, non-linear creation of the post-modernistic actor, which surprises even the maker of the game himself (Ben Dov, 2010). (The glossary at the end of the article is meant to aid in familiarizing with the terms of the model).

## **Principals and Basic Concepts of the Model**

### **1. Basic Assumptions**

(a) **Play in suchness/** play for itself – is a real, concrete phenomenon that occurs similarly to any other cultural phenomenon such as religion and science. During play, the actors themselves are not in the Winnicottian transitional space and their playing is not perceived as a transitional phenomenon. The transitional space only exists for the actor-therapist.

(b) When play is used as a transitional phenomenon/in-between space, it collapses. there are three manners of collapse: 1. When a goal exists outside of play; 2. When there is an audience watching the play; 3. When there is tendentious interpretation and/or a connection to life is made. In these situations, play can no longer be called play, but a playful situation used for some other thing.

(c) Self-healing can occur when the play is spontaneous; when the actor is offered safe and appropriate conditions, without competition or condemnation, no matter his intentions; when the play occurs in a subconscious and autonomous manner.

### **2. The Frame of the Play**

#### **A. Working through storyline and character portrayal**

The therapeutic work is done through storyline and character portrayal – the model is compatible with the notion Jennings (1999) has of the balance required in therapeutic work through drama between the element of 'ritual' and the element of 'risk'; the frame and the ritual create security, predictability, and knowability. They act as a container for development, journey, and adventure. The risk means going on an adventure where everything can be new and different, open for a different outlook within the known and familiar container. In the storyline, everyone present portray roles, so that the play has no witnesses or outside characters watching.

#### **B. Aletheaic Space (Comprehensive Space), Live Play, Transitional Space**

in 1951 Winnicott coined the term 'transitional/potential space'. This space is a place of encounter where imagination and reality unite. It is a space for experiencing and play, which summons an encounter between the subjective omnipotent experience and objective reality; a space that holds paradoxes. In 1971, twenty years later, Winnicott (1995) expands the definition of the term and claims: "we assume here that the task of accepting reality never ends, that no living creature is free from the tension involved in

connecting inner and outer reality [...] throughout life this [...] This late definition shows culture, science, religion, and other regions of life as transitional spaces” (p.46).

Per this current model, **Aletheia<sup>4</sup> Space (comprehensive dramatic space)** is a space that contains both definitions: a **live play** space shared by actors and actor-therapist, representing actual reality; a symbolic, temporary **transitional space**, meant for the actor-therapist alone, from which one can reach insights and an outer observation of the play. The outer observation of the play done by the actor-therapist occurs only after the play and never during the course of it; this is similar to the transitional space created between parent and baby. For the baby, it is an actual space for itself while for the parent it is a space for experiencing and a space for outer observation.

Lahad (2006) defines the term fantastic reality – "a region in which time and space are suspended, where the impossible becomes possible and exists parallelly with concrete reality, where the three laws of actual reality have no control: time, space, and role" (p. 47). In fact, Lahad claims that space, time, and man are imaginary. In reference to the term "imaginary" he claims that: "'fantastic reality' has rules but since they are opposite to the rules of reality they allow the as-if space where every 'if' is possible" (Lahad, 2013, personal correspondence). Jennings (1995) points out that dramatic space itself is a live, organic medium in which we exist. In the spirit of this, this current model defines the playing space as **live play**, play where the participants dress up as characters and play them actually.

Therefore, in order to carry out **live play** fully, one must confirm that three states of consciousness occur: connection to place, time, and man: (a) connection to place – although live play occurs within a closed, structured, and fixed space, the plot of the play occurs in an actual place such as a town, perceived as clear and real as any concrete space; (b) connection to time – the time in which the town plot occurs is real, tangible and fixed; (c) connection to man – in this model this is a connection to the characters. The characters played (the carpenter, the knight, the protégé, etc.) are tangible, stand on their own, and interact fully and actually with their surroundings.

When these three states of consciousness occur, the actor is situated deeply and wholeheartedly within the live play space. This space is no less real than any other reality; on the contrary, live play is a concrete space in the full sense of the word! Just as a child in class is situated within a learning space, and then at dinner he is situated within a familial space, so too in a drama therapy session is situated within live play space, which is a space in suchness and for itself. The actors treat it the same as any other cultural phenomenon, therefore there is only room for necessary intervention in it, the interpretation in it is accompanying without a connection to daily life. This method corresponds with the book *Art as Therapy* that sees art itself as a healing power contrary to the method Art within Therapy.

### **3. The Rules of Play: Self Organization and Feedback**

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<sup>4</sup> Aletheia (or Alatheia) was a Greek Goddess that represented the spirit of truth. The literal meaning is the state of not being hidden; the state of being evident, factuality or reality. It was revived by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1963) in his essay: *The origin of the work of art* (p. 17). Uni. of Waterloo.

Self-organization is a quality discovered by the new sciences (Ben Dov, 1997). It emphasizes the natural, independent healing capability of the group. Its basic assumption is that small changes in the primary connections between group members may lead to actual change in the wider circle of the group. Lahad (2006) explains that sometimes he invites his supervisees to think of the group as “a system or as an organization such as a factory or a circus or a place such as a central station or an airport” (p.113). Gersie (1994) describes the behavioral patterns of the playful system and claims that play has an inner pattern of activity. Landy (2000) supposes that the vision of the group is not necessarily fixed, but is changing and harmonious with organizations and re-organizations.

Accordingly, one of the ground rules of the model *Leelah – Play for Itself* is the principle of **feedback**, literally self-feeding. Feedback in this model is a state in which information regarding an outcome of a playful event affects the interruption or continuation of another event or of the same event itself. In group feedback, the group learns through a feeding back of information received from its own activity, and thus the group allows the play to correct the system and balance it in a new place. When the group has a frame that is good, guarding and protecting, this occurs naturally, and it would be a fault to execute any intervening action on behalf of the group leader, such as tendentious interpretation or any other form of manipulation. Feedback at the level of the actor is the measure by which the actor learns about the quality of role execution from the execution itself, without needing initiated feedback or interpretation.