

De-Roling and Debriefing: Essential Aftercare for Educational Theatre

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I invite you to examine the given circumstances of the 2020–21 academic year. We were (and to a certain degree, still are) in the midst of a global pandemic, a fraught election cycle, police brutality, xenophobia, imprisonment of children at the Mexico/United States border, an insurrection at the nation's Capitol, an unstable economy, and thousands of artists out of work for what seems like an eternity. Many colleges and universities opened their campuses despite urgings from the Centers for Disease Control to keep social distancing. We were not only managing our own anxieties about the world and doing what we can do to contain the pandemic; we were anxious about those flouting medical science by going to bars, restaurants, and large social gatherings without masks or any form of distancing. As I write this, vaccines grant us a hope that the pandemic may end. Even as we may begin to feel our bodies' tensions depart, however, so much about our daily lives remain unchanged. We will be a long time shedding the stress of this year.

Imagine for a moment that this pandemic year's stresses were the given circumstances for a role you were playing, perhaps for an acting class. You took on all this emotional turmoil and physical stress in the course of living fully within this world. Then the performance ends. Would you be able to leave that emotional state behind at the drop of a hat? Would you be able to leave the work behind in the space and go about your day or evening unencumbered by the emotional rollercoaster you just took your instrument through? As our society grapples with the challenge of emerging from a period of long stress, we as theatre teachers have the opportunity to renew our attention to the tools we give to student performers to help them shed the extra stresses of living imaginary lives. Such de-roling and debriefing practices, I argue, are essential.

I am moved to write about these practices because, in my work as an intimacy designer, I have seen a troubling lack of attention to healthy transition and processing between the stresses of the studio and the stresses of life. Students often lack the tools to do this work, the expectation being that they learn techniques on their own or that they should naturally be able to segregate actor and character. In reality, however, this is not always the case. For instance, once when I was teaching de-roling and debriefing practices in a college intimacy workshop, a skeptical faculty member asked me, "Do we really need to teach our students how to do this?" A student in the room immediately shouted out, "Can I respond to that?" She looked directly at her professor and firmly stated, "Yes. Yes, you do." A chorus of students chimed in, attesting that their experiences in X or Y production during the previous years would have been significantly healthier had they had such techniques at their disposal.

Examining some of the major acting texts commonly used in academic settings, I find little to no mention of what to do post-performance. For example, Konstantin Stanislavski, Sanford Meisner, William Esper, and Anne Bogart make no mention of what to do post-rehearsal or post-performance in their major acting texts (Bogart and Landau; Esper and DiMarco; Meisner and Longwell; Stanislavski). Sonya Cooke's *Seven Pillars Acting: A Comprehensive Technique for the Modern Actor* nods towards the post-rehearsal process in discussions of rituals both pre- and post-performance as a part

of her acting pedagogy, but the discussion of post-performance ritual spans all of three pages in the text (159–61). In this small sampling of acting texts, it is not surprising that students are affirming to their professors that they do not have the tools necessary to transition out of a role and leave their work behind in the theatre.

Our students need tools to transition out of a character and recenter themselves, and that need is especially heightened with the panoply of pandemic pressures they are encountering. In this note, I introduce de-roling and debriefing, grounding both practices in psychology and medicine. I argue that de-roling and debriefing should be incorporated more fully into rehearsal and studio processes. Although these methods have been advocated for in years past, our field's present attention to mental health and life/work boundaries render now an opportune time to renew the call for these tools becoming an essential element of theatre pedagogy.

Defining De-roling and Debriefing

De-roling names the act of transitioning from character to actor once a rehearsal or performance has concluded. It can be done as a solo exercise, in pairs, or collectively as a group. It can take a number of forms, such as a ritual, a facilitated dialogue, or a reflective journaling session. De-roling became an important and integral step to the development of psychodrama and drama therapy in the early and mid-twentieth century. J. L. Moreno, the pioneer of psychodrama, argued that for any effective group therapy or psychodrama session, there are three phases: a warm-up; the action of the psychodrama; and sharing after the psychodrama performance has concluded (Lipman 8–13). Part of the sharing process after the performance of an individual's psychodrama can include de-roling the other participants in the psychodrama (called "auxiliaries"). Group members who portrayed auxiliary roles share their experiences from the roles they play, and they discuss as a group how those roles might relate to the individual's experience; for example, by shedding the role of the absentee parent and providing alternate viewpoints for the "protagonist" patient as to their experience playing the auxiliary character (12).

Parallel in function to the method of de-roling is the method of *debriefing*. This procedure has become popular in the sciences recently as a critical step in training medical residents, nurses, and other personnel who deal directly with patients. Senior director of clinical programs at the Center for Medical Simulation Roxane Gardner defines debriefing as "a discussion and analysis of an experience, evaluating and integrating lessons learned into one's cognition and consciousness" (166). Debriefing often comes into play after a medical simulation; in medical simulations, a "patient" (often a trained actor hired by the department or another student in the program) is seen by a student reporting a specific set of symptoms. The trainee attempts to diagnose and treat the patient, and after the "visit" is complete, debriefing occurs between the patient, trainee, educator, and other colleagues. This form of active learning to reflect upon the process of the experience includes the patient stepping out of character to share their experiences of the trainee, which is very similar to the auxiliaries used in psychodrama. As with de-roling, debriefing is specifically focused on troubleshooting what happened, what went well, what went wrong, and what can be done the next time to create a better outcome.

Debriefing and de-roling perform distinct functions. Debriefing creates an opportunity to collectively reflect upon the process as a whole, whereas de-roling offers the chance to reflect upon the self. Debriefing focuses on the team element, and how to improve all elements of the team for the betterment of the community. De-roling, on the other hand, is a chance for the individuals to "cleanse the palette" for each individual participating. To borrow a distinction introduced by Moreno, debriefing enables *group catharsis* while de-roling facilitates *individual catharsis* (Meisiek 808). When used together, a transparent, supportive, and healthy working space can develop.

Debriefing and De-roling in Theatre

While debriefing and de-roling hold significant value in the psychological and medical realms, there have been attempts to implement similar practices in theatre. The closest parallel to debriefing in theatre would be the practice of post-mortems, where production teams reconvene to discuss how the process went, where things could have been smoother, and what adjustments could be made going forward to better the chances for a successful artistic product. However, this practice only takes place once the work is completed; in other words, proposed solutions can only be implemented for future shows because the production being discussed is already over. Debriefing practices are also present in Theatre of the Oppressed work. In *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, Augusto Boal includes a final step of discussion between the protagonist and those who played characters within their rainbow. He gives specific instructions that “all the actors must tell of what they felt or noticed from within the scene, while participants express what they felt or noticed observing the scene” (156). These observations are intended as ways to provide the protagonist with outside perspectives from the other characters within their rainbow so they can reflect upon how their actions may or may not impact those around them. Similarly, some educators use debriefing methods to facilitate discussion around a particular performance project. This reflective process encourages students to identify opportunities for growth moving forward in their artistic practice, as well as creating a space for dialogue to troubleshoot moments of difficulty or frustration with the previous project with some distance to reflect more objectively.

While theatre has been somewhat successful in implementing group-debriefing practices, it has been more hesitant to implement de-roling. For one thing, de-roling is not a one-role-fits-all activity. The time and effort needed to de-role from a character like Hedda Gabler differs from the time and effort needed to de-role from Tree #3 in *The Wizard of Oz*. As educators, we often facilitate and teach students how to warm up their instruments in varying capacities (vocal warmups for musical theatre, dance warmups for dance class, articulator warmups for speech and dialect classes), but the expectation often falls to the student to figure out what to do after class is over to return to stasis. This could partially be due to the time constraints that educators often face in a fifty-minute course and the desire to quickly get through the warmup (or expect the students to complete it before class begins) to focus on the content of a given class session. Some faculty do include a “cool-down,” but from the courses I have observed or participated in where this was part of the practice, the goal of the cool-down was more on the physiological elements of cooling down like stretching rather than a psychological cool-down such as de-roling. In addition, the courses that included cooling down were more often movement-based or courses that had high levels of physicality or athleticism rather than the intellectual and emotional gymnastics of psychological realism. This has resulted in students not developing any sort of protocol to leave the work behind in the studio or rehearsal space. There is a false expectation that students already know how to do this, but many do not have the tools to do so. These practices are not uniform, and there are a variety of methods available for practitioners to incorporate into their curriculum. Yet for the most part these techniques seem to go unused.

These Concepts Are Not New

Over the years, there have been several calls for a method of de-roling and theorizing what it could be for theatre practice. Actor and psychoanalyst Janice Rule was the first to discuss the impact of a role on an actor in 1973, when the husband of a client she had begun to behave like his abusive character, unaware that he was doing so. After the show closed, he returned to his normal self, then regressed when playing a militant role several years later. While not necessarily having the terminology yet to pinpoint what she was seeing in her actor clients, Rule notes a pitfall with the actor’s “inability . . . to separate the real person from fictional character” (66). Theatre scholar Suzanne Burgoyne Dieckman begins the inquiry into de-roling practices in “A Crucible for Actors: Questions of Directorial Ethics,” in which she reflects upon the techniques she used to immerse the

actors in their characters for a production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and how the processes used inadvertently harmed the actors in the process. From this experience, she embarked on a journey to have a better understanding of how to ethically support actors with difficult roles by studying psychodrama. Burgoyne Dieckman also is the first to directly engage de-roling to theatre scholarship:

Psychodrama includes methods for deroling (sic) participants and for providing some resolution to traumatic experiences. Ongoing discussion with psychodrama colleagues also suggests that keeping student actors in character rather than bringing them into direct work on personal analogies may provide a psychological cushion. Interdisciplinary dialogue on the ethics of actor training could help develop ways of working which are psychologically sound, as well as artistically effective. (7)

Building on her theory, Burgoyne partnered with psychologist Karen Poulin and theatre student Ashley Rearden to do a qualitative study of the impact of acting on student actors. Their study concluded that boundary management played an important role in creating good practices for actor self-care. More importantly, they directly call “for theatre educators to help actors discover how to handle boundaries rather than to ignore the problems and let students flounder” (170–71). Burgoyne contributed greatly to the development of de-roling theory, and this study validated the need for methods to assist actors in transitioning out of character.

The first de-roling method presented in theatre scholarship comes from Susana Bloch, creator of the Alba Emoting technique. In her article “Alba Emoting: A Psychophysiological Technique to Help Actors Create and Control Real Emotions,” Bloch gives us a name for the emotional state that actors experience when they are unable to leave a role behind: “emotional hangover” (128). In her “step out” technique, she guides actors through a yoga-like breathing cycle followed by facial relaxation and adjusting to a neutral posture (128). Her technique is ritualistic in nature and its goal is to achieve a neutral state. In other words, Bloch’s step-out technique is a purgation of the emotional state that the actors just experienced so that they can transition back to stasis—a form of catharsis.

Richard Owen Geer builds upon Bloch, Burgoyne, and Rule’s work in “Dealing with Emotional Hangover: Cool-down and the Performance Cycle in Acting.” This article serves as a call to action—a provocation—that more research and scholarship needs to be created regarding post-performance processes, and that more theatre educators need to teach them to their students. Pointedly, Geer asserts that “[t]he theatre is not the only profession to encounter this problem; it is, however, one of the last to do something about it” (149).

Geer’s call, however, seems to have gone largely unheeded. After a flurry of articles in the 1990s, talk about de-roling or debriefing in theatre seemed to disappear until 2016 when drama therapists Sally Bailey and Paige Dickinson proposed several individual de-roling techniques in their article “The Importance of Safely De-Roling.” Many of the methodologies suggested in this article enforce the idea that actors are not the characters they play; they are additional layers that an actor puts on, like wearing a coat made of the character. Unlike many of the inside-out acting approaches popular in the United States, these strategies reinforce the idea of an outside-in acting approach.

I call these names to your attention because this concept is not new, nor is this call new. Theatre educators and practitioners have been calling for and advocating for the implementation of de-roling and debriefing practices since 1991. Four of these articles appeared in issues of *Theatre Topics*. In this pandemic pause of practice, we have the opportunity to reinvest, reincorporate, and reeducate ourselves in these practices and implement them into performance pedagogy for the health of our students and craft.

More than Just Intimacy Work

As an intimacy designer, I value de-roling and debriefing as an essential part of my practice. However, as tools they may be applied within contexts beyond theatrical intimacy among performers. Actors can bring in any number of traumas into a rehearsal space, and as educators, it is impossible for us to predict what a specific student's trauma may be. We can, however, reduce the harm that acting pedagogy might inflict on a student by providing, teaching, and devoting classroom and rehearsal time to de-roling and debriefing practices. Movements like *We See You*, White American Theatre (#weseeyouWAT) call our attention to the special pressures placed on Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) actors when they are asked time and again to portray racialized trauma onstage for predominantly white audiences. As actor Melisa Pereyra describes in her *Howlround* article "We Have Suffered Enough: The Cost of Performing Trauma for Women of Color":

As actors, our minds may know violence on stage is part of play, but our bodies don't. The reality of what we do is such that, if a scene requires my scene partner to put shackles on my wrists, forcefully kiss me, or sexually assault me, there is no way to communicate to my muscles that I am not in danger. And for women of color there is no way to communicate that to the transgenerational trauma that may be present in the body. (n.p.)

The larger conversation about creating and recreating theatre that stages BIPOC trauma is beyond the scope of this note. At minimum, however, it is clear that these actors especially need to be given the tools such as de-roling and debriefing in order to employ some degree of self-care in a theatrical industrial complex that is not designed for them.

But actors are not the only ones who can benefit from de-roling and debriefing tools. It is also the designers, directors, technicians, and stage managers who witness acts of trauma, violence, sexual violence, and other events and stories that may be triggering to them. It is the dramaturgs who are asked to investigate and research content that is important for the production, but may be a psychological minefield depending on the historical context or subject matter of the play. De-roling and debriefing functions may even apply to the audiences working to empathize with characters, engage in critical dialogue in a talkback, and process what they witness in analytical assignments for class.

Granted, educational theatre is not therapy. But theatre—the art of representing human lives and human stories—does have the potential to impact artists' mental health, especially within contexts where lives and stories are so traumatic. Thus I maintain that educational theatre needs to provide the tools to ensure that our students know how to create and sustain healthy boundaries around the theatrical work they create, design, produce, and watch.

Conclusion

In this global pandemic, we are experiencing collective trauma. We feel exhausted constantly. We have to trudge through each day, trying to teach when our well is already dry. We may not be able to function as effectively because we have emotional hangovers from the anxiety of the crashing economy, the collapse of higher education, and the stagnant job market. It seems impossible to compartmentalize the anxiety we are experiencing in our day-to-day lives from our teaching experiences. We do our best to leave it at the door, like we ask our students to do, but we carry baggage with us when we enter and leave the space.

If we as educators are experiencing this, be certain that our students are experiencing it as well. Incorporating de-roling and debriefing practices into our theatre pedagogies, I argue, can help us all to engage challenging work in the studio while still being able to function beyond it. The methodologies are not one size fits all, so we must teach a variety of tools (Bailey and Dickinson

have already provided several). While intimacy practitioners can bring these tools to you and your department, they are not a band-aid or quick fix. Implementing de-roling and debriefing requires a shift in thinking about acting pedagogy, time management for classroom and production spaces, and concrete pathways for students and faculty to engage in productive dialogue and feedback when things go wrong. In this period of deep reflection upon our practices, policies, and pedagogies, we can—and must—give these tools to our students.

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