

DREAMING TOGETHER



Explore Your Dreams
by Acting Them Out

JON LIPSKY



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Part Three

MAKING DREAM THEATER



Dramatic Dream Enactment



Dreaming with an AIDS Patient

In this dream, I'm standing on the corner. It's just some corner. And I look across the street. And all I know is . . . My only thought is . . . I have to cross to the other side.

“Christopher’s Initiation Dream,” his first dream in analysis, from
Dreaming with an AIDS Patient

In the late 80s, my fascination with dreams and theater came together in the creation of a dream play called *Dreaming with an AIDS Patient*. Robert Bosnak was working on a book by that title about the psychoanalytic work he had done with a man named Christopher, who, in the course of his therapy, died of AIDS. He told me about his experiences with Christopher and showed me the series of dreams that Christopher had left behind in his dream notebook.

This was no ordinary dream series. And the book was not an academic exercise. The dreams had themes and images that developed and transformed through Christopher’s intense struggle with AIDS. Furthermore, Bosnak was not an aloof therapeutic witness; he became deeply, emotionally involved in Christopher’s journey and the book was a labor of love. Here was the stuff of drama—a complex, intimate relationship and a spiritual awakening under the shadow of death.

This work brought into stark relief an aspect of dreams that I had not fully appreciated before: that dream images often repeat themselves and transform over time. Some people return again and again to a particular landscape or a particular activity. Christopher, for instance, dreamt of beautiful queens and polluted waters and landscapes that were black and white. His initial dream in therapy, that he had to “cross to the other side,” was the first in a series of dreams about “crossing over”—crossing over sexually, crossing over mortally, bearing his cross. These recurring images often transformed and morphed according to

how he was feeling emotionally or spiritually in relation to events in his real life and his struggle for survival.

This seemed to me, then and now, fascinating as a theatrical experience. It is extremely evocative to see dream images come to life and real life presented in terms of stage images. The idea of following dreams that return again and again to certain themes and images opened my eyes to new possibilities in theater. This led me to introduce informal Dream Enactment shows as a regular part of the performance curriculum at Boston University, where I teach, and to culminate my Dream Enactment training workshops with dream presentations.

What I discovered was that everybody I worked with—students in an acting class, women in a women's group, therapists at a dream conference, and museum workers in Australia—had dramatic stories to tell through their dreams. This is where I realized we all have "our own Shakespearean stage" inside of us.

A few years after writing *Dreaming with an AIDS Patient*, I developed another full-length play, *The Wild Place*, based on a dream series of Susan Thompson, who gave birth to her second child while still nursing the first. Her dreams were not only moving and haunting; at times they were hilarious: dreams of squirrels eating at her house, dreams of a ravenous alligator sleeping in her kitchen. On a more profound scale, her dreams, like Christopher's, reveal something universal about human experience. You don't have to be pregnant, or even female, to appreciate the primordial, almost bestial, feelings that come up when your body is responding to its most basic instincts. In this way, we connect to a common vocabulary and grammar that bind us together through the language of dreams.

Other dream shows have followed: a collection of dreams which seems to chart a soul's journey from birth to death, for instance, or a dream series that chronicles one woman's illicit and exciting love affair. Sometimes the dream presentations are informal and varied like a cabaret, and simply provide a window into the imagination of the dreamers; sometimes the presentations are more formal and coherent, suggesting more overarching, universal themes that bind the dreams together. Whatever the form of presentation, I find Dream Theater to be, often, the best show in town.

I want to make it clear that these dream plays are in no way "dreamy" or

surreal. Like real dreams, they are concrete and specific in their details. But taken as a series of images, they play, in many ways, more like music than like drama. The images tease us with meaning and evoke moods and feelings that are suggestive and provocative. Dream images and real life resonate with one another and in the end we are left with a vivid portrait of the dreamers, their inner lives and their daily lives.

The following sections, then, are a guide to the creation of your own Dream Theater—either an informal presentation to your friends and colleagues, or, if you are ambitious and theatrically inclined, the creation of a “Dream Café,” a performance space, sort of like a jazz club, where you might come to hear a hot set of dreams every night.



Shaping the Dream Show

Informal ensemble presentations

The simplest form of Dream Theater is just a presentation of the dreams that your ensemble has collected at random and worked on as a group. It's sort of like a dream “show & tell.” Everyone gets to present his or her favorite dream. You'll be surprised, though, to discover that these “pictures at an exhibition” brought in by different dreamers will often resonate with one another, contrast with one another, and take your audience on an emotional roller coaster ride.

Since most dreams do not have a full dramatic arc, and since most loose collections of dreams do not have a coherent dramatic shape, I like to keep this kind of dream show informal, unpretentious, and minimally produced. The audience should feel that they've come to hear storytellers talk about personal experiences rather than thespians declaiming melodramas. These are just dreamscapes revisited. By keeping the audience's dramatic expectations low, it's easier to surprise, even amaze them, at how moving and theatrical dreams can be.

In choosing the running order of the dreams, look for affinities and dissimilarities. Structure the performance like music, clustering and varying the dreams by mood and energy. We'll talk later about creating more formal and coherent dream shows; but for now, with a random assortment of ensemble dreams, consider the presentation like a vaudeville or music hall show. That is, instead of the dog act, the chorus line, the standup comic, your variety show intersperses funny dreams, scary dreams, sexy dreams, and the like.

To further outline the structure of the presentation, you might want to give a title to each dream. While dreams are generally more ambiguous than a title suggests, labeling them creates a roadmap for the audience and helps underline affinities and differences.

You might even want to make a program listing the dreams and the dreamers, like programs you see in theatrical playbills. The purpose of this is not to undercut the informality of the presentation but simply to remind the audience that they are going to see a show, not a didactic demonstration. It draws the audience's attention away from the therapeutic, analytic, neurotic, and obsessive connotations of dreams, and focuses more on a theatrical mindset that is playful, imaginative, and evocative. It reminds everyone that these are the performers' own dreams, not unlike their own, and suggests that maybe they would want to share their own dreams with one another when the show is over.

In this spirit, at the end of the show have the dream ensemble take a bow and invite some well-deserved applause. This theater ritual helps bind together the common experience of actors and audience.

The dream as life story

Since we all recognize that dreams are personal and connect in some way to our waking life, audiences will project onto the narrator stories and associations that they imagine might have generated the dream images. Sometimes these imagined stories are obvious and true, sometimes fanciful and inaccurate. But the projection is inevitable.

For this reason, if you want the audience to experience your dream, and not simply speculate about it, you have to provide them with enough information