

# DREAMING TOGETHER



Explore Your Dreams  
by Acting Them Out

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Part Two

# CREATING THE DREAMSCAPE



Ensemble Dream Enactment



## They All Want to Play Hamlet

*They all want to play Hamlet.  
They have not exactly seen their fathers killed  
Nor their mothers in a frame-up to kill,  
Nor an Ophelia dying with dust gagging the heart . . .  
Yet they all want to play Hamlet . . .*

—Carl Sandburg

The idea of exploring dreams by playing all the parts was inspired by a theater production I worked on a few years after my “initiation” dream. It was called *They All Want to Play Hamlet*. In this solo-performance piece, the actor, Tim McDonough, performs a one-man version of Hamlet playing all the parts: Ophelia, Polonius, Hamlet, his father’s ghost . . . everybody. He also meditates on and dramatizes his own personal responses to Hamlet and to all the characters surrounding him. In the rehearsal room, I acted as the scribe, writing down the improvisations set up by director, Vincent Murphy, to explore the various personal and theatrical themes that had led Tim to want to put himself, so to speak, inside Shakespeare’s “dream” of Hamlet.

There was a strangely coincidental similarity between my rehearsals with McDonough and the dream work I was doing with Bosnak, the Jungian analyst. On stage, Tim was playing all the parts, looking at the story of Hamlet through the eyes of all the characters. In Bosnak’s dream groups, I was imagining all the parts, looking at dreams through the eyes of all the characters. Examining complex emotional material from multiple viewpoints was central to both disciplines.

What’s more, both experiences were deeply involved with the exploration of imagery. Like images from dreams, images from *Hamlet* were examined in rehearsal for personal associations, emotional resonance, and thematic connections. Hamlet’s inky black cloak, the poison that kills Hamlet’s father, the skull of Yorick—all became fuel for Tim’s own exploration of his life’s journey, particularly as it reflected his relationship to his own father.

During this time, Tim was developing an approach to acting he called "Acting through Imagery." To shape dramatic action he would create a series of actions, an "action score," based on the images in the text. Using body, voice, rhythm, movement, and other theatrical techniques, he would live inside the script by embodying these images.

For instance, Shakespeare's imagery in the opening soliloquy of *Hamlet* became the basis for Tim's physical approach to the text: "O that this too too solid flesh would melt,/Thaw and resolve itself into a dew . . ."

To start this speech, Tim would ask the same question we would ask of any dream image: "What's it like?" What's it like to thaw and melt into evaporating dew, and by so doing, disappear? To answer this question, Tim explored various ways to make his body, his voice, his very being, "melt" and "thaw," literally playing Hamlet sliding down a wall into a puddle of melancholy and self-loathing.

Seeing this, I realized that this kind of embodiment of imagery provides a highly specific technique for exploring dream images. As I was working so intensively with images in the theater and in dream groups, it seemed natural to try to combine the work. Dreams are packed with emotional images, perfect for training actors.<sup>6</sup>

So, I began using dreams to help teach acting, dividing the actors into small groups to facilitate the work in large classes. To my surprise, the actors, who had no experience in dream groups and no particular interest in exploring dreams, began having strong emotional responses to the work. I started exploring this effect with dream groups that had little or no acting training and discovered it was just as affecting for people whose only acting experience was in a Christmas pageant, a sixth-grade play, or telling jokes at a party.

By acting things out, people were having revelations, breakdowns, flashbacks, and fantasies around the dream material. It seemed that there was something about getting up on their feet, and about putting themselves back into the dream space, that freed them up and allowed them to dive to emotional depths. The dreams, of course, brought up personal material, but beyond this

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6. Dream Enactment is also an effective tool in training playwrights by teaching them how to write the way people naturally speak, and in training directors by teaching them how to guide a collaborative group in the creation of an original piece.

the most moving aspect of the training seemed to come from the fact that people were playing parts in one another's dreams and physically creating the dreamscapes.

In one dream group I recall, a woman had a startling experience when she found herself face-to-face in the dream space with the actress, Mia Farrow, a character in her dream. (This was Mia Farrow after her famous breakup with Woody Allen over his affair with her adopted daughter). In the dream, Mia was simply sitting at a table in a white dress and, when the dreamer approached, looked up at her. At first, telling the dream alone, her meeting with Mia Farrow did not have much emotional impact. It was just a curious encounter. But once we sat a member of the group in a chair to play Mia Farrow, things changed. When the dreamer approached, and Mia looked up, there was an electric exchange between the two women. It was all through the eyes. In that moment of eye contact, the dreamer felt bonded to Mia Farrow, as if she understood her deeply and felt her pain. And in that moment, a flood of a childhood memories swept over the dreamer—memories of betrayal and abuse.

This then is the major focus of this next part, an approach that allows you to encounter and interact with your dream figures and your dream world. In theatrical language, you could call it ensemble dream enactment; but, in simpler terms, it could be called, like the title of this book, dreaming together.



## Questioning Dreams

### **Getting everyone to dream your dream**

By telling your dream story to your best friend in a café, you can re-experience your dream in your imagination; by acting the dream out as a storyteller, you can re-experience your dream in your body as well. By using a group of dreamers to recreate the world of your dream, there is a deeper and more startling discovery to be made: you will find yourself actually inside the dream space in the presence of the dream figures.

Dreams, after all, are three-dimensional, as we have said. They take place in a garden, a mall, an airport, a castle under the sea. With the help of other dreamers, and perhaps a doorway, a staircase, a few tables and chairs, you can give yourself a sense that you are reliving the story inside the dream space. Of course, you have to use your creativity to transform a staircase into the rapids of a river, or two straight-back chairs into the cockpit of an airplane. You also have to use your imagination to transform some woman in your group into your sixty-year-old father, or a handful of actors into a raucous crowd in Times Square on New Year's Eve. But once you make this leap of imagination, there is nowhere you cannot go. When you meet the eye of one of your fellow dreamers and find yourself face to face with the gangster who has been chasing you, or the lover who has been longing for you, the experience can be surprising and revealing. And if you choose to have someone in the group play yourself—perhaps some particularly intense aspect of yourself—you can even discover how you appear to the other people in your dream and learn to see yourself in a different way.

Let me say again that the ensemble does not have to be made up of people who are experienced in acting. It just has to include people who are willing to take instructions from the dreamer on how to stand in for the different characters, environments, objects, and actions in the dream. Embodying these images, the ensemble becomes more like a chorus or a group of backup singers.

What defines the ensemble as an ensemble, and not just a group of random people, is its common purpose, which is to enter one another's dreams. Towards this common purpose each member of the ensemble has to use his or her powers of empathy to walk in the other dreamers' shoes. This isn't always easy, but is usually fun.

In any case, it takes a certain amount of time and effort. The following sections outline a method to help transform your group into an ensemble, a troupe of actors, to help you re-enact your dream. It adds ensemble images to the solo narrative that you have already created in Part One. In this process, other members of your group will play key images—taking on aspects of your dream, even aspects of yourself—to amplify the most essential

moments. In this way, the dream space is recreated and dream figures can be re-encountered.

Our central objective has not changed, though. First and foremost we are trying to find a way not only to re-experience the dream for ourselves, but to communicate that experience to those who are watching our work. Again, the audience may simply be other members of your group or a few invited friends—it might even be imagined—but it is important for both the specificity of the work and its depth that you are doing it, not just for yourself, but for others. This is the deeper implication of “dreaming together.”

An essential first step in getting an audience to dream your dream is to get your group to dream your dream. Unless they can imagine the physical details and the emotional impact of what you experienced, they can never recreate it for an audience.

The easiest way I have found to help your fellow dream actors step inside your shoes is to let them ask questions about your dream to fill in all the blanks. Through a question and answer session, they can get all the details and subtleties. This Q&A will resemble the kind of interchange you are likely to experience in a “talk” dream group that is trying to imagine the dream clearly. Once the ensemble has fully and precisely imagined your dreamscape, it is possible to cast them in your dream, show them how to act out the images, and incorporate them into the storytelling.

## **Dream Q&A**

Having told the dream with body and voice, and having narrated it from the point of view of all the images, you should have gotten a good sense of the dream’s emotional core. Almost everyone, though, the first time through, leaves out a lot and glosses over important information. The next step is meant to fill in the gaps and in the process convey to your fellow dreamers precisely what happened.

So, now, you will tell the dream again—this time to a small group of four to six dreamers willing to be your actors—allowing plenty of space for questions and answers. This questioning can also be done with a single partner, but there is power in having questions arise from different listeners and a



power, too, in trying to convey the experience not just to one person but to a group. A group of four to six is probably best so as not to overwhelm you with a cacophony of voices. This is also a good size for an ensemble of fellow dreamers to help enact the dream.

In this round, I find it best to go back to the simplest form of storytelling: describe the dream informally as if you were telling your dream at a coffee shop or around the kitchen table. You don't have to think at all about body or voice, just about recalling the images. As you tell the dream, the group will interact with you by asking questions until they are satisfied they have a relatively accurate picture of your dreamscape.

As much as possible the group should try to keep the dreamer *inside* the dream while asking questions. Group members can help you do this by not harassing you with questions but allowing the questions to slip in during pauses. Together, you all are incubating the dream. It is okay for there to be large silences while everyone simply sits with an image. If you find it helpful, you might appoint someone in the group as the image cop whose job it is to move things along if you get stuck by saying, "And then what happened?"

It is important in this work to keep the focus on the dreamer and not on the questioner. By no means should the process bring the dreamer *out* of the dream by anyone saying things like, "Oh yes, something like that happened to me" or "That's just like a dream I had" or even "I know just how you feel." That is all about the questioner, not about the dreamer. The members of your group should just ask questions, slowly, deliberately, without jumping around too much, as if they are holding each image up to the light and looking at it from all the different angles.

It may seem odd to put the questioning of dreams ahead of a chapter on listening to dreams. Clearly, the better one is as a listener the better one will be as a questioner. Still, the fact is, it's easier to be a good questioner than a good listener. With a natural curiosity, a receptive attitude, and a measure of common sense, your fellow dreamers can ask you questions as outsiders, learn a great deal about your dream and keep you focused on the imagery. A good listener, though, has to enter into the dream, see how the images resonate with one another, and sense where they are emotionally charged. This