

Annette Esser

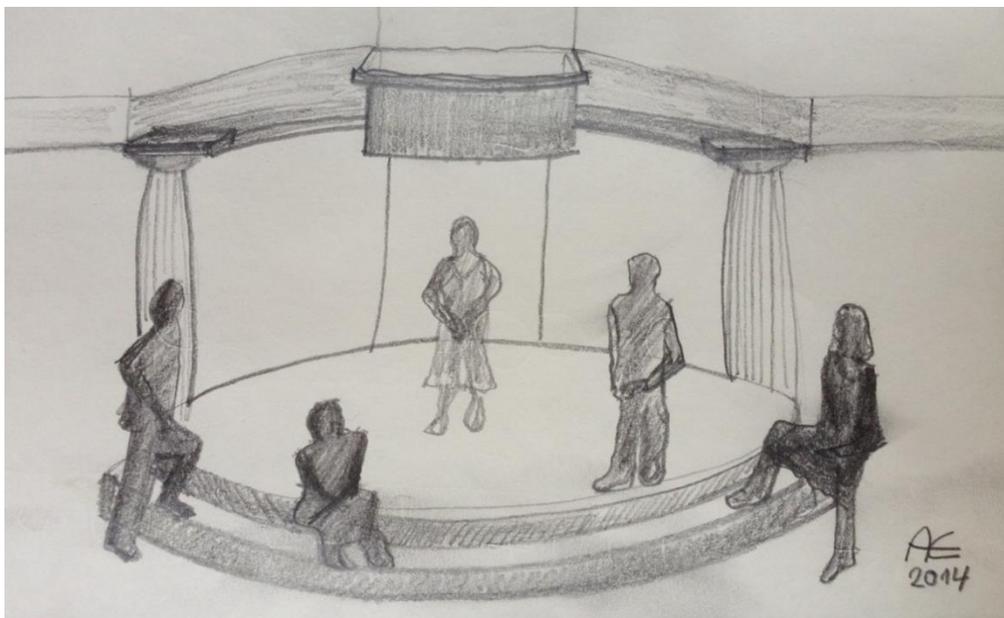
Stage and Space in Bibliodrama

A personal learning from Jacob Levy Moreno, Hildegard of Bingen, and Native Americans

As a bibliodrama-leader, I have learned from psychodrama that it is important to build up the stage not only in the right succession of time but also in the right order of space. Spatial order, that means for the leader not to define locations oneself but to ask the actors for them. For instance to ask the “Blind Person”, or the “Disciple” or the “Donkey” or even “Jesus”: Where is your place in this room? From where do you come? Where do you go to? – But are these questions really important or do they just serve as a stopgap for thinking!? Is it not enough to ask someone for his/her story and to let the director of a bibliodrama-play define the sites: here is the house, here is the lake, here are the Pharisees, from here Jesus comes...

About the impact of space and the meaning of the directions, I have learnt less in theology, but rather in my studies of art and geography, and from Hildegard of Bingen, from the Native Americans, from Jacob Levy Moreno and from Peter Pitzele. In this inter-cultural as well as trans-historic learning, the dimension of space is at least as important in human awareness as is the dimension of time. This is what I want to write about.

When I visited Beacon, Upstate New York, in 2008, the famous stage that Jacob Levy Moreno, the founder of psychodrama and group-psychotherapy, had set up in his clinic there had already been deconstructed a long time ago.



It was round and had three levels. Entering the stage step by step from the level of the audience to the level of the stage gives time for the initial interview, for focusing on the theme and for warming-up and identifying with one's role. On the stage, what is important in life of the protagonist, is put into action.

That means that according to Moreno, the stage offers the setting, where the psychodramatic theatre shall take place:

The space of the stage is an enlargement of life – far beyond the reality-test of life itself. Reality and phantasy are not in conflict, but they are both functions within a widely drawn sphere – the psychodramatic world of the objects, persons and events. According to his own logic, the spirit of Hamlet is as real and is allowed to exist in the same way as Hamlet himself. Delusions and hallucinations are embodied on the stage – and in this way gain a balance with normal sensual perceptions. The final solution of mental conflicts needs an objective setting, namely the psychodramatic theatre.¹

That means that an imaginative, a virtual and finally a very real space shall be created on the stage, - a space that directs all – the protagonist, the auxiliary-egos and the audience into a world of “imagination” or “phantasy” that is real, because it creates reality. Originally, there had been another space at the Beacon stage, namely the room „above“ the stage: a gallery from which the voice of Godfather sounded. Dr. Ella Mae Shaeron, one of Moreno’s latest trainees and my own psychodrama-teacher in Cologne and Virginia Beach, told me about this and gave me Moreno’s Testament of the Father (*Testament des Vaters*) as a farewell-present. The first words of „announcement“ in this testament are:

I am the father. I am the father of my son. I am the father of my mother and my father. I am the father of my ancestor... I am the father of the heaven above my head and of the earth beneath my feet...²

This sounds less like the words of a psychiatrist but rather like words of a poet or a mystic of whom we know that in his youth he walked through the streets of Vienna dressed as “Jesus”. As a Jew, Moreno said himself that he has gained his most fruitful insights from taking up the perspective of the Creator. To imagine how Godfather has created the cosmos and how he has put forth into movement everything in it and still is moving it, and how he looks upon all his creatures from above, - this has been the foundation of group dynamics and psychodrama for Moreno.

As a feminist theologian, I would like to remark critically that Moreno’s imagination of God’s perspective is very much related to the view “from above” and therewith to what Freud has named the “super-ego”. On the stage this guides to a distinction between the “above realm” as virtual heaven and the “below realm” as virtual earth of human beings. Opposing this is rather hidden a Jewish-Christian sapiential tradition in which “God” or the divine realm may as well work within us or between us. Standing in this tradition, Hildegard of Bingen has written a poem on the power of wisdom:

O virtus Sapientiae,
quae circuiens circuisti
comprehendo omnia
in una via, que habet vitam,
tres alas habens,
quarum una in altum volat
et altera de terra sudat
et tertia undique volat.
Laus tibi sit, sicut te decet, O Sapientia.

*O power of wisdom!
You encompassed the cosmos,
encircling and embracing all
in one living orbit
with your three wings:
one soars on high,
one distills the earth’s essence,
and the third hovers everywhere.
Praise to you, Wisdom, fitting praise!³*

¹ This quote by Jacob Levy Moreno is from the brochure of my training at the *Institut für Psychodrama Dr. Ella Mae Shearon*. I have re-translated it from German into English.

² J.L. Moreno, *Das Testament des Vaters*, written in German and first printed for the „Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag“ in Potsdam, 1922.

³ Hildegard von Bingen, *Lieder*, Otto Müller Verlag: Salzburg 1992, 131-132; 276-277; Engl. translation by Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: Saint Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine*, Univ. of California Press: Berkeley 1987, 64

The fact that the balcony in Beacon was removed and therefore cannot be seen on pictures any more has animated me to draw the design from my own imagination. And it let me reflect about the reason for removing it: probably this is not only because today “God’s voice” is not heard or understood any more as “Super-ego”, but rather because God does not play an important “role” anyhow in most people’s the lives. If only at all, the voice of “God” occurs in unexpected ways and cannot be planned. And here, the question about the realm from which the “voice” comes that determines oneself, or that is in accordance with oneself, gains meaning. Does it come “from above” or “from below”? Does it talk to us through other persons or do we rather hear it as an „inner voice“? So, my question is now whether or not such a voice that we may perceive as reality on stage, has really to do with concrete spaces and directions?

In a seminar with Professor George E. Tinker, a Native American of the Osai nation⁴, I have learned that in a first encounter “Indians” do not ask at first: What story do you have to tell me? What story does your family have? What is the history of your people? But rather: From which direction to you come? Where do your people come from? What are the nations like that live in the land of sunset? What does it mean that the white man comes from the East, the land of the rising sun? For theologians trained in historical-critical exegesis these questions from another culture seem rather weird and their purpose is not evitable. Yet, in the whole Christian tradition the directions have in fact been an important mode of thinking. Thus, all old churches are directed towards East where the sun rises: this is because from there the light of salvation comes. And in the Western part of Gothic cathedrals, the Last Judgement is depicted: because from the direction of the sunset, the last things are expected. And, in her vision of the cosmos, Hildegard of Bingen envisioned the demonic powers coming from the North and Christ, the sun of justice, rising to a peak in the South.⁵

What does that have to do with the stage in Bibliodrama? If it is true that in our awareness the dimension of space and the heavenly directions are equally important to the dimension of time? Is it true that time implies space and space implies time, or that story and history are always intertwined with certain sites and places.

To give an example: in 2012, young people traveled together with 90-year old Holocaust survivor Heinz Hesdörffer to Frankfurt, Amsterdam, Westerbork, Theresienstadt , Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg. At all these sites the youngsters listened to his story about exile, deportation, concentration-camp and death marsh, and could imagine it much better than in a history lesson. And “Heinz” – as he asked the young people to call him - was able to remember and tell his story because he returned to the places where they occurred, and, because he could see from the change of these sites today that they had become history themselves. The mutual journey that is documented in a film was a meaningful and even a healing experience for both sides.⁶

⁴ George E. Tinker is an Osai /Cherokee. He is author of *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1993. I took a class with him in 1994 at Union Theological Seminary in New York

⁵ Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias* I.3.

⁶ Heinz Hesdörffer, *Bekanntes traf man viele... Aufzeichnungen eines deutschen Juden aus dem Winter 1945/46*, Chronos-Verlag Zürich 1998. Heinz Hesdörffer was ready to visit all stations (Bad Kreuznach-Frankfurt/Main – Holland – Westerbork – Theresienstadt – Auschwitz-Birkenau – Schwarzheide – Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg), except Auschwitz, where the group had to go without him. Film: „*Schritte ins Ungewisse. Der Holocaust-Überlebende Heinz Hesdörffer erinnert sich*“ (=DVD), Evangelische Jugend an Nahe und Glan / Bildungswerk Heinz-Hesdörffer e.V., info@bw-hh.de; 2012.

In this way, I also understand bibliodrama as a healing journey into time and space. When the guiding questions in the interview are not only about clarifying an event's time sequences but also about the details of its site and directions, something important happens in the consciousness of the protagonist as well as in the awareness of the group. For, remembering a time is to imagine its place, and to imagine a place recalls its time. Imagining the porticoes at the pool of Beth-zatha (John 5) where the blind, lame and paralyzed lay, is important to enter into this world of the invalids longing for healing. And it is important to ask an actor where his or her place in the setting is in order to understand "from where" she or he needs to be collected. Then one may perceive that many actors do not wish to be in the center at the beginning, but rather intend to act from the edges; that someone who has taken the role of Jesus and enters the room is not really accepted in his role because he is not able to act in a way that reaches the invalids at the water; or that somebody who did initially not want to act in any major role but chose a position at the margins, is suddenly in the center of action because the emergency of the event called him as "savior" and thus he finds position reserved for Jesus: this is what I experienced in a Bibliodrama-play on the windstorm at the lake (Mark 4:35-41). In my experience so far, the assumption that no order on the stage can be found when each actor chooses its own place in the room did not prove to be right. More often I did see that "just by chance" the places that single actors had chosen for themselves in a room did fit organically into the group's play. Just in case there should really be a conflict about positions in a room, for me as a Bibliodrama-leader such a "disruption" would have a priority; from it a new theme or a new method of bibliodramatic experience could arise.

My New York Bibliodrama-teacher Peter Pitzele, whose method of Bibliodrama was further developed as "Bibliolog" in Germany, has taught me one thing: Any site, be it a simple seminary room, a single chair, or merely the floor, can become the place of an event, if the leader and the protagonist of a play develop a sense for the adequate time and space in which something may, can or must happen. When this sensitivity is not there, or when it is passed over, then a play "at the surface" can develop at best. If we wish to transcend historical-critical interpretation of a Biblical story, then we need to open up the space of our imagination. In order to do this, it is helpful to imagine colors, sounds, and smells of a place, to give time for building up something in a room, and to ask where someone is at the beginning, where he moves to and where in his/her imaginations others are who encounter him/her. If we do learn this, we make ourselves sensitive beyond the dimension of time toward the dimension of the site of a Biblical narrative. In short: if we manage to create spaces for our imagination and vision, then we transcend a simple role-play and really start to develop and unfold what we call Bibliodrama.

Annette G.E.Esser, M.Ed., S.T.M., ThD, born in Cologne, Germany in 1957. Studies of theology, art and geography at Cologne and Münster Universities, and at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Doctoral theses on feministischen spirituality at Radboud University, Nijmegen. Bibliodrama and Psychodrama-Training in Cologne, New York and Virginia Beach. Lehrbibliodrama-Leiterin (GfB) and foundress of the Scivias Institut of Art & Spirituality. www.scivias-institut.de

Summary

Having learnt about space and directions less in theology but rather in her studies of art and geography, as well as from Hildegard of Bingen, Native Americans, Jacob Levy Moreno and Peter Pitzele, the author describes her inter-cultural as well as trans-historical learning-process. She shows that for human awareness the dimension of space is at least as important as the dimension of time. And she concludes with the statement that only if we manage to open up spaces of imagination on the "stage" of our workshop-work, we may transcend a simple role-play and really develop and let truly unfold what we call Bibliodrama.