

Rite stuff

Symbolic games provide rewards for questing kids

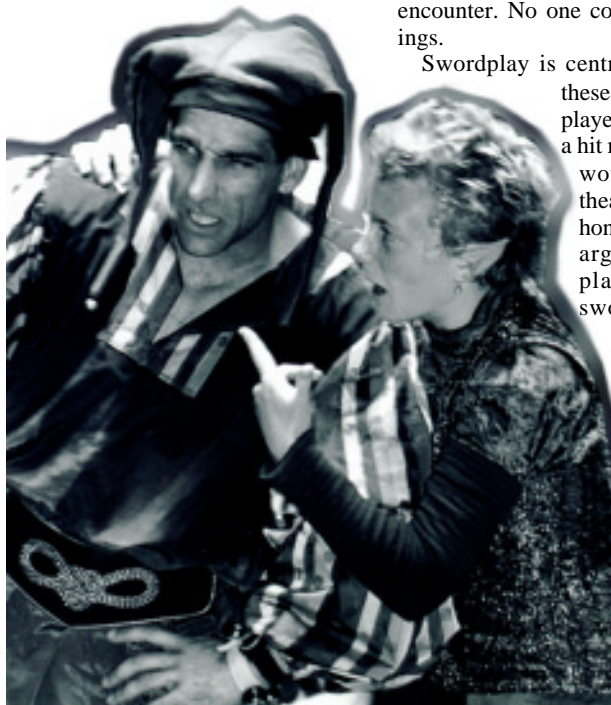
Six or seven young people, my 13 year old daughter's new friends, are in a tangle of arms and legs on my couch. The gaze they turn toward my husband and me is level, curious, confident, respectful, free of self-consciousness, and bears the promise of pleasant exchange. I wonder what planet they come from.

I learn that they have one thing, at least, in common. They are all regular participants in the Adventure Game Theatre. Does the game make the kid, or is a certain kind of kid attracted to the game? These young people will tell you that at least some part of who they are now has to do with their shared experience in AGT, the alternate universe created every summer by Brian Allison, Howard Moody, Ian Kaiser and the players.

For the past eleven years, in workshops held at the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies in Rhinebeck and on the rolling meadows and hills of the Center for Symbolic Studies north of New Paltz, Allison and Moody have guided groups of 25 to 50 young people, ages 12 through 17 or 18, through a series of epic games. Warriors, healers, thieves, wizards and other archetypal characters interact in a mythological system that draws from many different cultures and literatures and is more reflective of the worlds created by Tolkien and C.S. Lewis than any "real" realm or actual historical period. The celebrants don costumes and masks, are outfitted with armor and foam swords, and once clear about the rules of the game begin the journey or Quest, staying in character for hours at a stretch, making choices about how they will respond to the other beings they encounter. There are five workshops over the summer, ranging from five days to two weeks in duration. Some players attend all five.

By all reports, it's entertainment of a high order. But as 14-year-old Andrei Zimiles puts it, "AGT goes way beyond running around having fun in the woods."

Allison and Moody, the founders of AGT, bring a rich lode of training and experience to their work. Brian Allison, who is building two leather masks as I speak with him, "one Apollonian and one more Dionysian," has been an athlete, a teacher of children with special needs, and is the father of three



adolescents. Howard Moody trained with the New Games Foundation, Project Adventure and other programs. They share a passion in their current work with AGT.

"It seems to make kids feel good about their own dance with life," says Allison. "We place a high value on playfulness, on joy."

Moody believes that play is the best way "to tap the potential of the spirit."

Kaiser, a writer with organizational skills, joined Allison and Moody four years ago. He feels that this sort of play is particularly needed in a society "so distanced from myth and story."

The oral tradition through which a culture's ethos is conveyed to the next generation has dwindled to the efforts of a few practitioners in esoteric settings. For a variety of reasons, too many children are denied the benefit of adults who actively share their lives. Moody feels that our "canaries in the coal mine," our teenagers, find themselves unconnected to a larger story.

The live telling of a story invites the listener to enter its realm and to find in the archetypes aspects of his or her own nature to consider. It encourages and enriches the imagination. Allison wonders what we might have lost in terms of cognitive development by leaving this experience to the quick cuts of MTV and the dumbed-down repartee of sit-coms. We seem to be advancing a culture increasingly stimulating, myriad in its possibilities, but spiritually sterile, one in which the individual becomes, increasingly, a stranger to community and to oneself.

AGT offers a mythological system in which to play. It becomes, for many, a rite of passage. Cara Montgomery, a 17-year-old who has been playing since she was seven or eight and will be a staff member this summer, says that at AGT, "You have the chance to get in touch with all sides of yourself, to experience life through your imagination."

With this, she echoes Joseph Campbell from his interviews with Bill Moyers. Exploration of myth is not "a search for meaning, but for a more profound experience of being alive."

Through the years, Allison, Moody and Kaiser have developed many different "stories," some of which might get replayed with variations. Though given a sense of direction from the script, the players improvise at each encounter. No one controls the endings.

Swordplay is central to many of these meetings. The player who receives a hit must act out the wound fully and theatrically and is honor-bound not to argue over it. A player is also sworn to respect another's call to stop the action if there is the possibility of actual injury to either party. Healers redeem with bells, and a player killed in a skirmish enters the "RE-zone," to be reborn.

Rules govern the actions of every class of player. Even the most rebellious participant soon learns these are necessary to keep the game going. Moody says that a novice might begin with the impression that he or she is free to do whatever feels like fun. "Not true," he tells them, "if you screw up, the community will let you know." But this will occur in a way that allows everyone to save face.

Chief among the rules is a principle common to every long-standing belief system: Honor others and their feelings. Faced with a social challenge, a kid without the imagination to feel another's pain is, in Allison's words, "more likely to rely on the fight-or-flight response, the reptilian part of the brain." This lack of a sense that actions have consequences might be expressed in petty cruelty on the playground or in more serious anti-social



behavior. The news is full of examples.

AGT participants get ample opportunities to play at being ruthless. This emphasis on what can appear at first glance to be a celebration of a very earthy sort of power play can put some people off. Allison says AGT has been criticized for "promoting violence" and perpetuating a testosterone-fueled mode of interaction. "But the truth is," he says, "ours is a warrior culture, in which competitiveness plays a big part. One of the things we try to do is bring awareness and light to these realities."

Martha Zimiles, Andrei's mother, a designer and weaver, helped with costumes one summer and was able to observe the games at close range. "It is not a macho culture they create, far from it," she says. "A young girl can find within herself and express a marvelous strength."

Cara Montgomery has played a wizard, a warrior, various monsters and oracles. "Boys or girls can be fighters and healers," she says. "I love swordplay!"

The dark side is essential to the power of the myth. "Kids need to experiment with their shadow selves," Allison explains, "and they come through it." Once they've learned where adrenaline will take the mind and body, they begin to make other choices; they will spare an opponent, behave like heroes. Says Allison, "They get rather quickly that we are all taking care of one another, all the time." At AGT, the needs of the community are placed above the desires of the individual.

For Montgomery, Zimiles, Jesse Packer, Carmen Schwab Hill, and the

other players among my daughter's friends, this sense of community is central to their experience of AGT. The bonds they forge run deep.

"It's about opening up," explains Montgomery, "letting go of your ideas about who you are and interacting with people on a heart-to-heart basis."

With every workshop, the understanding of how the individual action affects the group deepens. "When you meet an elder in the woods," she says, "you know this is someone you should pay attention to." Discovering that the "monster" you impulsively killed carried valuable information, and learning how the murder changed the course of the game, becomes a metaphor for events in the "real" world.

Allison says that AGT, like its players, is "in young adulthood." Moody roles that AGT "hasn't really begun

to market who we are and what we do." The group is in the process of getting not-for-profit status. Its creators would like to bring some of the exercises they've developed to corporate settings, thinking that part of that ticket might help make AGT available to inner-city kids. They believe they have something important to offer kids at risk, and there are a lot of kids at risk.

The AGT experience resonates long after the last circle breaks up. Allison has had parents tell him, "My daughter was nicer to her little brother for months afterward." Zimiles admits he mourns when AGT is over, but says it sustains him over the school year.

"It's like nothing else," Cara Montgomery says. "You learn a respect for all people, for all life. And if your parents don't give that to you, and there were no AGT, where are you going to get it? Not in school, that's for sure!"

For information about Adventure Game Theatre, call 978-724-3428 or 888-792-PLAY, or Email info@agt.org. To register for events at Omega, call 845-266-4444.

©Sigrid Heath

Ulster Publishing Company's
alm@nac July 9, 1998 page 3