

WAYS OF LEARNING

Adventure Game Theater

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELAINE CRISCIONE



A figure cloaked in medieval dress steals up a hill in darkness backlit only by summer mist. Crickets betray the silence of a still August night. Drawing shield and sword from his cape, he passes a signal to advance to the others waiting below. A masked oracle meets the band of warriors. Studying a crystal ball, she offers a compelling prediction: the group must continue to the crest of the hill and meet their fate, either sudden victory or certain death.

Resembling action out of mythology, this scene being played on the Omega Institute campus in Rhinebeck, New York, is part of the Adventure Game Theatre (AGT), a unique form of improvisational theater. Initially created for adults, AGT now includes programs for those 12 and up. AGT's founders have been very careful to make their program age appropriate; it is not for little kids. Current offerings include weekend and weeklong play periods as well as advanced camps.

Theater of Life

Conducted in New York area teaching institutions for the past 12 years, AGT is the creation of Howard Moody and Brian Allison. Offering far more than simple dress-up battle games, this sophisticated play, accompanied by engaging scripts and costumes a Broadway production would envy, prepares its participants for the larger stage of their lives. Teens frequently return year after year, deepening their commitment and reuniting with their newly formed community.

Journey to Adventure

The Adventure Game Theatre came together as a blend of traditional and alternative education and its founders' love of sports training. Howard and Brian met in the late 1970s in the Connecticut school system, where Howard was a teacher and coach and Brian, an athlete. Sharing an interest in new philosophies of sports and play, they soon discovered the New Games

Foundation, developed by George Leonard and Stuart Brand. New Games emphasizes a philosophy of playing fair, playing hard with nobody hurt, where everyone is essentially a winner. It is truly an alternative to sports. Another important influence on the AGT has been the teachings of play expert Fred Donaldson. Donaldson emphasizes that play is a universal language and, in its original form, has nothing to do with contest or aggression.

Howard and Brian dreamed of expanding these concepts to include a structured and underlying theme. Slowly the elements of scripted outdoor adventure theater using soft foam swords and friendly play began to take shape. In Spring 1985, together with adult friends, minimal costumes, and rustic equipment, they played out scenes that comprised a single 45-minute adventure. Howard recalls that from the beginning the community formed was incredible, the potential for learning, boundless.

A Testing Ground

To further develop the game, its founders decided that they needed a testing ground. Consequently, they approached the Omega Institute, a well-known holistic arts-education center in upstate New York. Omega's 80-acre campus provided an ideal playing field for the Adventure Game Theatre. Howard and Brian presented AGT for the young adult staff of Omega for two years as an evening offering.

In summer 1985, Howard and Brian were teaching a New Games course for kids at Omega. One evening, Brian offered an evening session of the Adventure Game Theatre for the kids in the course, and they loved it. Howard and Brian then proposed an AGT course at Omega for the following year. The first AGTs for adolescents were held at Omega during Family Week of 1986 and 1987.

An Alternative Education Mainstay

Since then, the Adventure Game Theatre has become a mainstay of Omega's Family Week. During this unique family vacation, parents and children spend much of each day in adult workshops and kids' camps, then come together for family meals and evening gatherings. Of its popularity, Omega cofounder Elizabeth Lesser remarks, "I am impressed by Howard and Brian's ability to remain firmly in control of a large group of teenage participants, while also playing with them on their level, developing real

trust and love, and imparting an enduring message of cooperation and self-esteem to each child. During the Adventure Game Theatre, the kids' interest in conflict, aggression, and fighting are met with respect and channeled into creative conflict negotiation, a deeper understanding of their own natures and human nature in general, and a healthy understanding of true warriorship."

Supportive Play

The Adventure Game grew out of LifePlay, a form of cooperative play that emphasizes enjoying the process



rather than the outcome and playing with, not against, one another. Participants support each other while interacting in fun, theatrical, and convincing ways. LifePlay principles are evidenced in the teamwork that occurs in both the preparation and in the play itself. Before enacting the complex game experience, all agree on an integral principle: honor others and their feelings.

While living in a tight-knit community of like-minded youth who are stretching their wings and maturing, these adolescents learn how to channel their

energies and express creativity and service. A kind of spontaneous mentoring easily arises in this unique community of play.

Foundations for Adventure

The Adventure Game Theatre players are guided toward self-discovery through activities that culminate in a unique adventure. With the help of

game leaders, participants learn how to conduct themselves as individuals

within the context of a larger community. An onlooker may observe amazing costumes and be intrigued by medieval dialogue, but the teamwork, trust, cooperation, creative problem-solving, overcoming of fear, and self-esteem building woven into the adventure are the elements that actually take center stage.

Village Preparation

Preparatory workshop sessions begin the Adventure Game Theatre process. A "village" is established in which the seamstress begins to fit costumes, assistants prepare props, and participants absorb the founding principles of cooperative play. The rules of the game discourage competition and require team members to strategize, communicate, delegate, and commit to performing their part to ensure a sustained and successful adventure. The village buzzes with storytelling, myth-making, script preparation, mask creation, costuming, prop-crafting, and physical fitness, all in preparation for actual play.

Team-building is encouraged through group activities that include charades, name games, ball-throwing, capture the flag, and ball gymnastics. Adventurers interact in small groups, discussing and deciding what to do in every situation. Teammates tell stories about the characters they have developed; indeed, an important part of the experience is the imaginative dialogue and storytelling that emerge.

The Script and Players

Primary story writers, along with outside contributors, brainstorm to develop a storyline around mythic ideas, images, and elements. The plot begins in a state of flux but usually becomes unified around a focus such as tribalism, technology versus nature, oppression of native peoples



by warring factions, alchemical philosophy, fool's wisdom, good versus evil, the shadow, or the struggle for peace. After story elements are considered, the need for roles emerges. There can be:

1) Players, who know only as much of the storyline as the character would logically know and learn the rest as play advances.

2) Story-playing characters, who generally know more about the story's background and help run the game by acting in scenes with the players.

The cast usually includes a variety of royalty, oracles, monsters, merchants, wizards, healers, warriors, thieves, and monks, as well as individual characters created to enact a particular script. Participants seem attracted to both the rare opportunity for pure play and the deeper life themes involved. Fifteen-year-old Gen Cassagrande writes, "I used to play pretend games when I was little, but as we grow older, society

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forbids us. The Adventure Game Theatre has given me a very sacred respect for life."

Let the Games Begin

AGT co-creator Brian Allison observes, "There is a synchronicity operating in every story. It's fascinating to see how even random and sometimes haphazard developments serve the purpose of the story and the players. Within the play there are obvious teachings that emerge. Players experience these teachings through the

consequences of their actions. This is 'adventure-based learning.' It's definitely a kind of magic."

Using the entire campus, teams of players following their quest encounter different characters and situations and enact life-and-death struggles. During the course of action, characters seek the knowledge of an oracle as well as minister to the injured. Players are challenged to survive and succeed, yet they're also encouraged to let go of the concept of winning and enjoy the flow of the action.



An important part of the experience is a character's death process. If a player's character is vanquished during play, the player goes to "RE" (short for RE zone) and re-enters the game as a

Players usually stay in character throughout the entire play period, and the adventure concludes with a ritual ending that involves all players. Once completed, a follow-up storytelling

among the youngest members. Players connect in a very real way to the consequences of their actions, to an understanding of being human, and to a sense of a place in the world. For many adolescents, being involved in the Adventure Game Theatre has made a deep and lasting impression. For some, it has been a life transforming experience. A number of parents have taken Howard and Brian aside and rewarded them with the highest praise possible for an educator, "Thank you for giving me back my child."

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new character. Even after death, a player is never cast out of the proceedings.

Another part of the game's magic is that play continues into darkness, thus heightening the intrigue. Prop-makers have crafted special lanterns to help create a safe atmosphere for night play.

session allows participants to recount their adventures and process their experiences.

A Lifetime of Learning

Once play is concluded, a period of group closure occurs. Reflections are deep, profound, and emotional, even

Advanced Camps

Over the years, Brian and Howard have worked with students from a variety of colleges throughout Connecticut, including Wesleyan College and the University of Hartford. They've staged private events at YMCA and 4-H camps, and recently designed a two-week Advanced Camp



at the Center for Symbolic Studies in New Paltz, New York. Previous participants who choose to go deeper can attend this “postgraduate” training, during which they live in tents and help run the camp—a formidable challenge in a rustic atmosphere. They participate in a morning council to express their feelings and help the community function well. Advanced campers remain in touch throughout the year to work on stories and develop characters.

Future Plans

Howard and Brian are creating a traveling theater experience. The Adventure Game theatre is expanding to be a year-round venture and has recently formed a nonprofit corporation offering artist in residence programs to schools and other organizations who want to learn more about improvisational theater, mask making, mythology and creative play.

Looking ahead, Howard and Brian would like to offer a week-long AGT experience in which adults can explore their mythic natures. A long-term goal is to find the Adventure Game Theatre a permanent home, where more elaborate stories and settings could be offered complete with a full-time staff (including many of the kids who have grown up with the process). The founders have been asked to consult with the Disney Development Corporation in the growing arena of youth play and service programs. However they choose to script the Adventure Game Theatre’s future, one thing will remain constant: the love of the game.

Elaine Criscione is a freelance photographer in New York. Her work has appeared in numerous national publications, exhibitions and theaters. A favorite project is photographing the Adventure Game Theatre in action at the Omega Institute.

For more information about Adventure Game Theatre, contact Adventure Game Theatre, 73 Glasheen Rd., Petersham, MA 01366; 1-888-792-PLAY; www.agt.org

