Mary Nicholas, PhD, LCSW, CGP, FAGPA, Member, Group Foundation Board of Directors

B ack in the late 1970s, my late husband, Gene Eliosoph, and I were attending a large psychotherapy conference in Washington, DC. One morning, Gene told me he was going to a workshop with Playback Theatre and that he had been asked to play a role. I thought that sounded intriguing, but I went to another workshop, saying I would see him later. After my workshop finished, I got some coffee and sat down. A woman rushed up to me and looked at my name tag, “Mary, I thought that must be you!” I was startled. (She actually looked like me.) “I just played you at your wedding, and Gene played the clarinet.” For the rest of the conference, people were telling me how much fun they had at my wedding.

That was my first experience with Playback. Years later in 2007, I was on the Conference Committee at the Eastern Group Psychotherapy Society (EGPS) when we invited Playback to perform. I got to be a storyteller, and the troupe poignantly enacted the recent loss of my dear friend and co-therapist, Jan, who was known and loved by many at EGPS, in a piece called Missing Jim. Enticed by the above stories, the Education Committee of the Group Foundation sponsored an unusual fundraising event on Zoom. A group of approximately 60 AGPA members and their family and friends participated in a group theater activity presented by Playback Theatre. A troupe of five actors and dancers with a musician, each zoomed to us from a different part of the country, was led by a magical master of ceremonies, Hannah Fox. Hannah began by bringing the audience into the show by asking us questions that poignantly enacted the recent loss of my dear friend and co-therapist, Jan, who was known and loved by many at EGPS, in a piece called Missing Jim.

Each audience member was then invited to tell us a brief tidbit about how they were feeling, e.g., relaxed or stressed. Then, the troupe transformed that conversation into miniature scenes, then they moved on to the next participant. The experience was deeply moving. In this Zoom event, the actors were divided into boxes and each box was decorated with a personal message. For example, one box had a message that read, “You are not alone.” Another box had a message that said, “We will get through this.” The actors then acted out scenes based on the messages in the boxes. This was a unique and powerful experience. It was like watching a mini play unfold in each box. The scenes were poignantly acted out and they focused on different themes such as hope, resilience, and connection.

For example, a woman stated she had been working, sleeping, eating, and playing all under the same roof since March and had totally lost track of time. Then the players, each in their own box, illustrated what she said—one eating from a bowl while standing at her computer; another yawning and stretching; others wordlessly working, dancing, wandering, fretting—all somehow totally in sync with each other.

Next Hannah invited longer stories. Commensurate with these dark and difficult times, some of the stories were about loss and deep anxiety about the future, depicted with great empathy and a kind of gentle precision. Others shone with hope about what might come next after the awful 2020 year.

Th e Education Committee of the Group Foundation is specifically tasked with helping to create our important fund-raisers. Christine Fitzstevens, LCSW-R, CGP, FAGPA, Chair, and I were excited to hear the Playback Theatre from fellow Group Foundation Board Member Mary Nicholas, PhD, LCSW, CGP, FAGPA. This was my perspective following the performance, held in December.
VIRTUAL PLAYBACK THEATER Continued from front page

Last fall, I dreamed I was in prison. It was not a bad prison, but a prison, nevertheless. The pandemic imprints each of us in different ways. But when audiences were asked to tell stories from their current lives, a Black member told his dream of being on death row. I was jolted once again with the realities of so many in our country. I was quickly aware of my great privilege, including the opportunity to see offering to reach out to heal the wounds of this unique theater experience.

This production was about stories—our stories—and how magical, soothing, and healing it can be to have them witnessed by others. As therapists, we do this daily. With this group of actors performing our stories, I have a sense of how much more can be done by bringing together the wide range of people who make up the human experience. Many others shared their stories. I am inspired, I thought of how I could do this, to bring this to others. Here is a collection of some of the people who make up these stories, as presented in group.

“Could you step into that story/from and talk about it as if it was yours?” “What are the feelings in the story/dream?” “Are you passive or active?” “What metaphors come to mind?” “Where does the story/dream end?” “Is this where you are stuck?” In this format, I saw these stories out and address these questions. I saw how this moved the storyteller to a new place with their story, as well as touching the rest of us in the audience.

I regard the theater as the greatest of all the art forms, as there can be something much more than just a means of entertainment, the theater can reach, to make us think, feel, and understand the world we live in.