

The Art of Emotion

Pamela Sackett Speaks on Her Art of the Heart

(This article appeared in the January 1997 issue of Seattle Repertory Theatre Company's literary magazine Prologue.)

Pamela Sackett was first introduced to The Rep via Ted Sod, the Outreach and Education Artist-in-Residence. Sackett is now a teaching artist with The Rep whose classes deal with issues of self-accessibility, awareness and expression. From writing commissioned monologues to teaching in King County Juvenile Detention Facilities, she has proven time and time again that her particular style and philosophy are not only beneficial, but necessary to the concepts of "education and outreach" in the Seattle community. Sackett's work is at once comprehensive and simple, basic and profound; her programs focus on a theme of "emotion literacy," a phrase she coined in the continuing development of her curricula. Here she offers some comments on various aspects of her work.

—Alexis Chamow

Emotion Literacy: Emotion literacy is largely experiential. Essentially, it is about creating a pathway by which the mind and heart can collaborate. Although its effects have proven to be of a so-called healing nature for both myself and my students, I see emotion literacy, primarily, as an educational process, not a therapeutic one. Our emotions are not the clearest reflectors of subtle things going on inside of us—no matter what the setting. A good lot of individuals do not take notice of some of the subtle things going on because they don't know how to notice them. For my purposes, that lack of knowledge is a matter of learning a new language, not assessing a certain condition. I'm talking about an altered context here.

Teaching: When it comes to subtle details, we rarely take or are given the opportunity to be aware of how we are channeling our responses in relationships, events and circumstances. Even so, our perspective rarely allows for a complete understanding of those responses. The invitation I extend to students allows them to acknowledge something they might not have acknowledged otherwise—through art. Art provides a kind of container and art, within an emotion literate framework, provides a lens by which to view that which we have contained.

Theatre and Emotion Literacy: I have worked in theatre as a performer, a playwright and a monologist and this has helped lay a sturdy foundation for my emotion literacy work. I have

always documented, translated or interpreted my responses to relationships and circumstances through art forms—a song, a poem, a monologue, a play—I was escorting myself through life that way, living an examined life. At one point, I turned a corner, devised a new art form I call rhythmic prose and became even more deeply engaged. I went from merely examining my life to rigorously evolving. This set my course in creating works within the confines and expanse of emotion literacy.

Goals: I am resolutely invested in turning up the volume of the mind and heart to track the ways our thoughts and feelings take shape. I am trying to get people to sit and listen to themselves and to others, to pay attention from a different angle. I am guiding people towards a less familiar place and, through my experience, art and teaching, I create a familiarity with this place so that it becomes part of the fabric of understanding. I want people to be curious enough to explore more about this program because it is work that needs to be shared.

An Emotion Literate Viewpoint: There's the story you tell yourself, and the story you know, which one is true, which one is you? There are the things that you say and the things that you do. There's the you that you think of and the you that shows through. Which part is seen? Which part is waiting to be seen? Which part sees who?

—*edited by Alexis Chamow*

Interview with Pamela Sackett

by Maximilian Bocek
of the Seattle Repertory Theatre

This interview was part of the press packet for the Trigger of Light event, consisting of a public reading and emotion literacy workshop at Seattle Repertory Theatre in June of 1995.

REP: So how did you come to be doing Emotion Literacy in the first place? How did that develop? You're a writer, right?

PS: Yes, I'm a writer and I'd been writing for the stage . . . I'd written music and plays and I'd performed and I had a comedy act . . . all sorts of stuff. But I think when I started designing plays for special populations and monologues, actors monologues, I came to understand a sort of non-verbal communication, which is what emotions are all about, especially deep-seated emotions that you're not automatically aware of. When I say "emotions," it's not the surface emotions: happy, sad, that kind of thing. It's really a deeper reality, an undercurrent reality that isn't necessarily in keeping with some of the current ways people think about things.

In *Speak of the Ghost*, I devised a different language—I call it rhythmic prose—that forms a mental framework so those nonverbal realities can be housed, in a sense. If I continued to think like everybody else I don't think I would have tracked and connected with those deeper parts of myself. So I had to actually create a different way of thinking, and then with the artistic form, I really was able to express some of those parts.

REP: Would you call this a new language? Or is it just a sort of... It sounds almost like a sort of containment device, or chiaroscuro, where the shadow exists and you're adding dabs of light until the shadow comes out, that kind of thing?

PS: Yeah, exactly. There's a little quote in the front of my book: "Shadows are, in reality, when

the sun is shining, the most conspicuous thing in a landscape next to the highest lights." It's a John Ruskin quote. I mean, 90% of communication is non-verbal. To me that says that a lot of what we do and a lot of things that are going on, circumstances, come from a deeper part of us that we're not necessarily conscious of. The conscious part of ourselves is a very small percentage of what's operating. So I think that's true of the emotional reality, or I call it the "emotional body." There's another side of us—certainly there is if you grow up like I did.

I grew up in a repressive environment where I had a lot of feelings and responses to things that were going on, feelings and responses that weren't mirrored for me. Instead, I was taught to rationalize them away. People get talked out of their feelings and emotions all the time, and kids are the least able to guard against that, because they are the most in need of being mirrored.

So that's what emotion literacy is all about when it comes to working with children, especially at-risk kids, because they're not getting that mirroring, they're getting feedback that says, "Adapt, adapt, adapt. Put those feelings away: adapt. adapt, adapt." And those feelings don't disappear. Alice Miller writes that angry teenagers do not fall out of the sky, that for each of them, their anger is in fact a cumulative reaction to how that person has been treated. I've heard many people say, "Oh, you're a teenager, of course you're going to behave this way, of course you're going to rebel." This is a set of assumptions that doesn't really ask "why."

Going into the juvenile detention facility, I felt like so much of the struggle I had was that I was going in with hope and optimism and finding so much resignation. At the facility, it stands out in bold relief. I have seen this emotion literacy process work in my own life. I've seen physiological changes, I've seen circumstantial changes, I've seen my ability to get close or

intimate with people shift dramatically.

REP: You and other people you've worked with.

PS: Yes, and other people, through my speaking engagements and through my book, *Speak of the Ghost*. So yes, I have a tremendous optimism. There's a scene in *Trigger of Light* in which a child insists that he doesn't mind being treated the way he's treated in juve [juvenile detention] because that's the way it's supposed to be. That doesn't say anything about how he really feels about it. The resignation is in thinking that, "No, it couldn't be any other way than this, so why question it?"

A lot of times, I'd work with the kids and there would be so much resignation in that room that it would take a lot of stamina to be sensitive to what was going on and, at the same time, stick by what I had been experiencing. It was all I could do to keep basing my activity in that class room on what I know to be true, that change is possible, hope is justified, my optimism is realistic.

REP: So you've had, you and the people you work with, epiphany-like moments—a "*Trigger of Light*," kind of thing . . . excuse me while I make a little connection—?

PS: Exactly.

REP: Was it difficult working with kids who are resigned to their lives, after having worked with people who were hungry for knowledge about themselves?

PS: Right. Their appetite has been deadened. There is a hunger, but still there is this "giving up" that happens. I absolutely think that violence is a sign of resignation. The level of anger matches the level of unmet need. There is something under that anger that, to me, is the essence: what's underneath there is a tremendous amount of grief. Until you go into that process of grieving with a conscious understanding of its original source, I think what you're left with is a

feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. And there is no real thought that this could be different somehow until you accept the grief and move forward with it.

I did a residency at the Alder Academy through the Seattle Arts Commission. It's where kids go when they're let out of juve or kicked out of other schools. Some of their thinking is, "This is how I get my security. I've got to have a gun to be secure in this world." It was clear to me that this was really a sign of their sense of powerlessness. Their attempt to not be powerless was to get a gun.

But I think the ultimate power in terms of human potential lies in the ability to have that vulnerability exist, because in that vulnerability, you can be open to taking things in, you can afford to be curious, you don't have to be constantly walled off and be on the defensive, or the offensive, to "protect" yourself. Learning is a vulnerable state; you cannot really learn unless you're open and vulnerable. If your vulnerability has been exploited, and a lot of kids' vulnerability has, then vulnerability associates with abuse, or not being safe. And you can't risk that.

I know from myself that if I'm mistreating somebody, or being impatient with somebody, I can always track somewhere in my history where I had been treated that way when I was a dependent. Remembering that, going back and really feeling how that hurt me, I'm not going to do that to somebody else because I've gotten in touch with what that felt like.

With at-risk youth, they've forgotten what it feels like to get hurt. They've removed themselves from that because it's so horrifying. Then they become the offender, because that seems like the safest position to take, or continue to be a victim because that's familiar—or both. The thing with working with kids is to try to get them back into a place where they can be vulnerable again, and trusting and open.

REP: How has it worked so far?

PS: Once you break through a little bit where they get more and more and more open, they get incredibly open, and the need is great for them to be heard and to be mirrored. I saw kids go from not wanting to participate at all to participating a little bit to not wanting me to read their stuff to letting me read it to reading it to their peers themselves, and on and on and on.

REP: Investing more and more.

PS: Really investing in it more and more. And that was the thing, to get to that place. I show my vulnerability. I read some material from my book where I become vulnerable. I let that be known. I mean, it's clear in the book how much of my vulnerability I was exposing and connecting with. Once they see, "Oh. She's doing it and nothing's blowing up. Maybe I can try that a little bit." They have to get open somewhat so they can get something out of it.

The minute they see how that feeds them, the investment will naturally come from that and they can invest more and more and more. If a child has a response to something, an emotional and feeling response, you notice that and you let them know you're noticing that in some way.

REP: I see. So they see you seeing.

PS: Exactly. But not by lip service, but by really feeling a connection to that child. That's how you let that connection be known. There's a lot of so-called mirroring where you say, "Oh, yes, I hear what you're saying." But to actually, make the connection, you have to feel it in yourself first. I identified with those kids' sense of powerlessness, 'cause I know what that feels like, and I've gone into that part of myself. Acknowledging your sense of powerlessness requires some power—if you know what I mean.

REP: Tell me a little about Seattle Rep's volunteer organization, SRO, and their involvement in getting *Trigger of Light* going.

PS: I had started my residency and I was about through with it. I had like two more sessions. Ted [Sod, Education & Outreach Coordinator] called me a few days before and said, "Will you do a presentation for SRO's monthly meeting?" I asked him twice, "What's the purpose of this? What are your objectives?" "Well," he said, "we need to fill them in on what's going on in education and outreach. I want to focus on your residency."

So that day I was scheduled to come here then dash off afterward back to Detention. I thought we were going to be in a little conference room. I hadn't really prepared. As soon as I got to the theatre, they started leading me to the Mainstage to a table with lights . . .

REP: It's like an actors' nightmare.

PS: "Oh," I thought, "they want me to give a formal presentation!" Basically, when I started talking I was so happy to commiserate with people who seemed genuinely interested in what was happening, and I was very, very affected by this residency. I had been there for almost three weeks and I was constantly thinking about these kids. I was thinking about them, dreaming about them and really concerned about what was going on. The whole experience really affected me.

So I was talking about what I was trying to do there with my Emotion Literacy Program. In the process of describing that, I brought in some of the kids' writing to further show some of the ideas about emotion literacy and how it was being used with this population. The writing and some of the things I said in connection to it really affected people. I could really hear people responding to it.

And then there were some questions and concerns, like the woman who asked, "You're taking them into the light here, and your residency is about to end. What's going to happen? What's going to happen to them?" From some of the writing it was clear what the kids were going through emotionally. It was amazing

what some of those kids wrote. There's one piece that's in *Trigger of Light* that just lays it all out about how children adapt to the adult reality so they can survive it, and how so much of that involves tucking away their feelings.

So I'm packing up my stuff, and some woman from the audience is down at the front of the stage with tears in her eyes and a check in her hand. She looked at me and said, "I just have this intuition you should just stay there, even if it's just once a week." She said, "I don't usually do this sort of thing, you know, but I think you should stay there." So that was the end of that, and it was nice to feel I had some support there.

I raced off to Detention. I did not want to be late for that class: it's 50 minutes, then the guard comes and takes them out, and it was my second-to-the-last day. Later I found out that right after I left The Rep, a woman had stood up and said "I'm writing a check for Pamela's residency to continue and if anyone else wants to see her residency continue, now is the time to write a check." And people did. That's how *Trigger of Light* was fueled.

In essence, that's how my book, *Speak of the Ghost* was funded, too; several people wanted to see it in print. My intention with both projects is to build bridges—internally and externally.

REP: Could you say a bit about the title, *Trigger of Light*?

PS: "Trigger" is not meant to associate to a horrible weapon, it's about being triggered. To me, a violent response means a person has been triggered. But if they had an understanding of what they'd been feeling, I don't think their behavior would follow suit on that initial trigger to lash out or to shoot a gun or assault somebody verbally or physically—or try to silence themselves and take in some kind of mood altering substance, from a Coca-Cola to a hard drug. But the trigger is the key thing. If you can realize that you're triggered in a certain situation,

you have responses to such situations all the time, if you realize, "Oh, I'm having a response. Is this response pertinent to what's going on right now, or is it something from before?"

Now for kids, they don't have a real long personal history. So even though, yes, they can be triggered and they are triggered, it's not such a long route to go to that source. The term "trigger" is very key in my Emotion Literacy Program because it's about being in the moment with your experience and then tracking the source—with a pen. Instead of a gun, a harsh tongue or drugs, I use the literary arts—the written and spoken word—to shed light on the reality of long-held hidden feeling.