

## FEATURED TSM TRAINER

### BEN RIVERS



Ben Rivers was born in the UK and raised in Australia. He specializes in the use of therapeutic and participatory theatre for community mobilization, cultural activism and collective trauma response. He has taught and practiced in Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East and North America, working extensively with communities impacted by structural oppression and political violence. Ben is a founding member of The Freedom Theatre's Freedom Bus initiative (Jenin, Occupied Palestine) and a Co-founder of the Arab School of Playback Theatre (Cairo, Egypt).

He holds a Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology with a concentration in Drama Therapy from the California Institute of Integral Studies, USA, and is currently a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of New England, Australia.

Ben's articles have been published in professional journals around the world ([link to list of articles](#)). He is a Registered Drama Therapist with the North American Drama Therapy Association, an Accredited Trainer at the Therapeutic Spiral Institute, USA, and an Accredited Playback Theatre Trainer through the Centre for Playback Theatre, New York.

Ben holds 20 years of experience as a Vipassana meditator in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin. He is currently based in Cairo where he works as an educator, group psychotherapist and theatre practitioner. He can be reached at [benrivers@gmail.com](mailto:benrivers@gmail.com) or followed on Facebook ([FB link](#)).

### THREE-YEAR TRAINING PROGRAM IN EGYPT

In November 2014 Ben Rivers, TSI's Middle East trainer, partnered with Studio Emad Eddin Foundation, Orient Productions, and the Egyptian Association for Group Therapies & Processes to offer a 3-year International Certification in Trauma Therapy and Psychodramatic Group Work.

The program, now in its second year, offers training in the Therapeutic Spiral Model, psychodramatic group work, and somatic approaches to trauma healing and psychotherapy. Practicum projects, group supervision, student directing, extra-curricular peer-support, readings and written assignments are also included within the curriculum.



Ben leads the groups with a student cohort that consists of 15 Egyptian and Lebanese practitioners from the fields of psychiatry, psychotherapy, education and community work. Intensive training blocks occur twice per year at a rural retreat centre located approximately 30 miles south of Cairo. This beautiful centre is built from natural materials and sits at the edge of the desert within sight of the ancient Bent Pyramid of Dahshur. ([click for more photos of Dahshur Center](#))



### TSI'S INTERVIEW WITH BEN

**TSI:** Hi Ben, thank you for agreeing to be featured on our first newsletter. As I read all you've done, read your published works, and follow you on Facebook, I'm taken with the drive, energy, and compassion you have. Is there any particular person or event that has informed or influenced your choices?

**Ben:** I have always felt a strong desire to join with oppressed people in the creative struggle for a world that is more peaceful, more just, and more equitable. Perhaps this drive comes from my mother. As a child I would often join her at meetings, study groups and political actions where the currents of feminism, socialism and environmentalism were largely present. These ways of viewing and responding to injustice, exploitation and structural violence would play a significant role in my later life path.

In addition to being an activist, my mother was also a social worker and humanitarian aid worker. Her stories of direct encounter with various forms of deprivation and oppression would inspire me to take up similar work as an adult.

In my early childhood, both of my parents were involved in Tibetan Buddhism. This led me to Vipassana meditation – a practice that has guided and sustained me on a daily basis for the past 20 years.

**TSI:** How did you come to Psychodrama and Playback Theatre?

**Ben:** As a child and youth I trained in dance, circus and physical theatre – thus learning firsthand about the therapeutic and empowering aspects of the performing arts. Later, as a social worker in a maximum-security prison, I witnessed the profound impact of arts-based approaches. Through poetry, music and visual art, inmates were finding ways to explore and express the fullness of their humanity. This re-awakened my own desire to connect and communicate through the arts. I joined a local Playback Theatre group (in Hobart, Tasmania) and through them learned about drama therapy and psychodrama.

**TSI:** Please tell us what made you choose TSM training.

**Ben:** In 2008 I moved to San Francisco in order to undertake Masters-level training in drama therapy through the California Institute of Integral Studies. I loved psychodrama and wanted to go deeper, especially in a method that focused on trauma recovery. Through my studies I had learned about the work of Kate Hudgins and felt drawn to study under her. In particular, I was attracted to the TSM emphasis on building strengths and resources *before* direct engagement with the core traumatic event/situation. The integration of psychodynamic theory, neurobiology, somatic processes and expressive arts also held enormous appeal. As with any type of therapy or training though, the quality of one's connection with the therapist/teacher is of central importance. Kate's extraordinary warmth, generosity and spontaneity, together with her brilliance as a trainer and clinician, drew me in from the start.

**TSI:** Your most recent published article talks about aesthetics, especially in group. When you are directing a personal drama, do you consciously aim for the aesthetic -- both for protagonist and for the group? If so, how do you achieve it?

**Ben:** Throughout the ages, aesthetic expression has provided a way for us to understand and communicate our human predicament. In psychodrama we

are drawn to experiences that are rich in imagery, sound and poetic resonance. They restore our faith in the potential for beauty, creativity and cooperation that exists within our human species. Aesthetic experiences also leave a deep sensory imprint – an enduring and somatic memory that we can return to when needed.

Nonetheless, notions of 'beauty' are influenced by socially conditioned tastes. As a response to these determined preferences, Moreno advocated a theory of creativity and spontaneity – believing that we can find a new and appropriate response to each situation that faces us. With this ideal in mind, I search for a unique aesthetic in each drama – one that arises from the images, associations and metaphors that are offered by the protagonist and group, and from my own response to this content.

In my article, *Mobilizing Aesthetics* ([link to 'aesthetics' article](#)), I provide case examples of aesthetics within psychodramatic group work. I also speak about specific techniques that can be used for preparing and leading a group.

**TSI:** In teaching and training others, what do you try to convey as THE essential feature. I.e., what would be a 'word of wisdom' to a new trainee, especially one who wants to work in volatile situations?

**Ben:** When I first went to occupied Palestine, I was drawn to the idea of 'healing' trauma. I quickly came to realize however that trauma occurs within a broader social and political context. In the case of Palestine, trauma is but one symptom of Israeli occupation and apartheid. In this context then, it appears unethical to focus purely on symptom reduction while ignoring the root cause. Of course, we should use all our knowledge and skill to help ameliorate suffering in the here-and-now. At the same time though, we should keep our eye on the broader horizon, understanding that a truly effective response to trauma must include social and political action against the underpinning structures of violence and oppression.

**TSI:** What sustains you, Ben, in your practice to be able to keep going?

**Ben:** I am nourished by my friends, my family, the people I work with, and the love, playfulness and growth I experience in our encounters.

My meditation practice also provides me with a sense of groundedness and daily renewal. In addition to that, I like to write - especially poetry.

**TSI:** Is there a poem you would like to share?

**Ben:** Yes. This is a poem I wrote last year.

The Old Man  
Wears a bright shirt  
An offering to the world.  
He picks up his flute  
And begins to play.

The Farmer  
Not far from here  
Puts down her plough  
And starts to sing  
As if her aches  
Were suddenly gone.

In the town next-door  
The Battalion Leader  
Trains his men to fight  
But today their limbs  
Will not obey.

On the coast down south  
The Fisherman's Son  
Brings good fish  
For the Boss  
But today he cannot eat.