

THE ART OF RECOVERY

*Turning addiction into art with
Transformational Personal Theatre*

STORY BY RICK LEVIN • PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA



AN ADDICTION MASK CREATED BY THE
CAST OF TPT'S *NOT HERE: FROM
HOWLING HURT TO HEALING HOPE*, THE
ALCHEMY OF ADDICTION RECOVERY

In theater as in life, timing is everything, though just showing up is a good start. And at the Healing Trauma Project on Coburg Road, where performers have been rehearsing in anticipation of its Feb. 7 show at Wildish Theater, the cast of Transformational Personal Theatre has definitely shown up, in itself a small miracle. These are people who, all things being equal, might not have shown up at all.

As well as being newfound actors and dancers and singers and poets, the folks at this rehearsal are addicts in recovery. They have had their struggles with drugs and alcohol and food addiction. Now they have gathered to transform their personal stories of pain and renewal into the stuff of performance.

They are, in essence, learning to stage their deepest selves as works of art — to turn themselves from victims to survivors through the positive alchemy of the creative process.

Not Here: From Howling Hurt to Healing Hope is the brainchild of Judith Voss, founder and artistic director of Transformation Personal Theatre, or TPT. Despite holding a masters in counseling psychology and a doctorate in special education, Voss chooses to forego the strictures of standard therapy — the couch-and-talk model — for the more dynamic processes of fostering creativity as a means to overcoming trauma.

“What I am interested in is creative expression as a way of connecting or becoming reacquainted with one’s soul,” Voss says. “In my experience, the failure of one’s soul to thrive leads to great maladies of spirit, which in turn leads to depression, illness, addiction and a sense of being a living dead person, going through the motions of life in an existential crisis of loss of meaning and purpose.”

In anticipation of the project, Voss in August placed an ad in local papers, calling for people in recovery who might be interested in performing in a theater project focused on wellness and healing. “No performance experience necessary.” The folks who volunteered, men and women spanning the age spectrum and recovering from various addictions, are now involved in creating a staged work that delves into the darkness and light of their true-life stories.

The idea, Voss says, is to take that core hurt at the center of an addict — a hurt often compounded by years of shame and secrecy — and bring it to the surface as part of a communal theater experience.

But wait, you might say: Isn’t enacting those stuck places of pain and angst exactly what any artist does in creating her art? Perhaps, but for addicts in recovery, just surviving can be an intimidating proposition, much less turning their pain into the stuff of art. At TPT, however, the idea of who can be an artist is radically egalitarian.

This notion of inclusive creativity runs counter to our consumer culture with its cult of celebrity, but it’s an especially foreign concept to people trapped in the hell of addiction. Voss says, “I have a hunger in my heart to make those who are outcasted, shunned and devalued, for whatever reason, feel that they are not only worthy, but also quite possibly the most gifted among us.”

It’s about process, really. What that process looks like at ground zero, among a group of recovering addicts, is gloriously chaotic, like a series of baby steps met with joy, support and bursts of hilarity.

During the several rehearsals I attended, the cast buzzed and hummed in nervous anticipation. There were lots of hugs, and “I love you” was heard regularly. Contrary to what you might



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR JUDITH VOSS, PAPER IN HAND,
CHECKS IN DURING REHEARSALS WITH THE CAST OF
TRANSFORMATIONAL PERSONAL THEATRE