

INNOVATORS Q&A

This R.I. theater is offering in-house drama therapy

Susie Schutt, the Gamm Theatre's director of education and drama therapist, is expanding mental health support to schools and the broader community through a creative form of therapy.

By [Alexa Gagosz](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 31, 2022, 6:00 a.m.



The Gamm Theatre established an innovative, in-house drama therapy program offering an alternative form of mental health support to schools and the community. Susie Schutt is the Gamm's director of education and drama therapist. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

The Boston Globe's weekly Ocean State Innovators column features a Q&A with Rhode

Island innovators who are starting new businesses and nonprofits, conducting groundbreaking research, and reshaping the state's economy. Send tips and suggestions to reporter Alexa Gagosz at alexa.gagosz@globe.com.

The Gamm Theatre has established a new, in-house drama therapy program offering an alternative form of mental health support to schools and the broader community. Susie Schutt, the Warwick theater's director of education and drama therapist, began integrating social emotional learning with its regular school programming in the spring of 2020, when COVID-19 first hit Rhode Island.

Both in schools and virtually, Schutt found that drama therapy techniques were effective for students who were processing their own feelings about isolation, loss, and grief. She said these sessions allowed students to share personal stories while working through the creative process, unlike a more traditional "talk" therapy.

Schutt said the Gamm is believed to be the first professional theater in the country with a full-time drama therapist on staff.

"Art is so often brought into health care settings," Schutt said in a recent phone interview. "Why not bring health care into the arts?"

Q: What is drama therapy, and what is the role of a drama therapist?

Schutt: Drama therapy is a psychodynamic approach to therapy. Most people think of a typical therapy session as two people sitting across from each other and just talking. Drama therapy is really embodied: There's a lot of physical work that I do with my clients and it uses narrative in a very different way compared to traditional talk therapy, which is kind of reporting on your own life. Drama therapy uses storytelling, using role-play, and is much more interactive with a great sense of play.

Sometimes I draw something with my client or we create a mask and then they act out that character. There are times where a client is imaginative, and there are times when I just sit

and talk to my clients. But drama therapy allows me to use a lot of tools in a single session.



Inside the Gamm Theatre in Warwick, R.I. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Q: How could storytelling help someone in a therapeutic way?

Schutt: For example, I have a 12-year-old girl who is a client of mine that is going through some difficult family issues. We did a character sketch of the perfect person to talk to in this situation and what their qualities would be. She then drew this person and it turned out to be a superhero that was this thoughtful, kind, generous, curious person who asked her a lot of questions. Then she made a mask of this character, and acted out being this dream superhero of hers. I “interviewed” her and asked her what ways she helps others going through difficult times. Then we took off the mask and processed the ways that she’s already doing all of these things for herself.

So she was able to “try on” this character or role and realize that it’s not actually a role; it’s her already. It’s through this imaginative storytelling that she was able to cope with this certain

issue she was going through on her own.

Q: Are most of your clients children?

Schutt: My youngest client (as of mid-January 2022) is 9 and my oldest is 25.

Q: Is there a certain type of demographic that drama therapy works for? What about those who don't categorize themselves as "theater kids" or are extremely introverted?

Schutt: Therapy is really all about finding the right match — the right therapist and the right method. But drama therapy is so individualized and it could work for everyone. For someone who is an introvert, for example, I would dig into your interests. If you like to read, I would find out what kinds of books you're reading, what characters you're drawn to; we could bring in some text and explore that and then think about the ways that the storyline connects to your own life and start to draw out the narrative that way.

For someone who is an introvert, and finds it hard to walk into a room and say "here are all of my problems" and pour them all out, drama therapy approaches it completely differently. It's client-centered with so many tools at our disposal. It's not a "one size fits all" approach.

Drama therapy can work for all populations: from parents with babies in neonatal care to those in hospice care at the end of their life. It can help those who are nonverbal, those in intensive care, and those with mental illness and extreme profound mental illness.

Q: Can you provide an overview of this new program at the Gamm?

Schutt: It's still very much in its development stages, but we have started a collaboration with [Samuel Slater Middle School](#) in Pawtucket (where they are combining the school's talk therapy-based social work practices with drama therapy techniques to address anger and stress management) and with [Thrive Behavioral Health](#) of Warwick (to provide drama therapy for children, youth, and adults). We are also providing private-pay drama therapy sessions for all ages at the Gamm (pay varies on a sliding scale), there are drama therapy

[classes](#) for adults at the Gamm, training for Gamm teaching artists in the best practices of

trauma-informed classroom management, and we have included trauma-informed content advisories and intimacy direction for productions.

We also offering professional development for K-12 teachers to integrate drama therapy with Rhode Island Department of Education's mandated social emotional learning curriculum.

Q: Where else can people find drama therapy?

Schutt: Frankly, it's still a somewhat "new" concept. There's an [art museum](#) in Montreal that does art therapy and the [Dundee Rep](#) is the only theater in the UK with a drama therapist on staff. But in the US, we have not found another professional theater that has a full-time therapist on staff.

Q: How could these services be expanded throughout Rhode Island?

Schutt: I work in theater. I'm not trying to make a million dollars. Part of my ethos is serving people and making sure that people have better access to mental health support services. We have grant funding in schools, and we do get support from donors. For example, in Slater Middle School's case, we are covering half the costs of these therapy services through our grant funding.

People can [donate to the Gamm](#) so that these programs are more affordable for schools to access.



Alexa Gagosz can be reached at alexa.gagosz@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@alexagagosz](#) and on Instagram [@AlexaGagosz](#).

[Show comments](#)

