



A Case for Drama Within Mental Health Hospitals

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Produced by Noon Creative Enterprise

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A special thank you to all those who believed in the project and supported its happening.



kamynu

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Drama has always been used in various healing processes. Historically, we see how storytelling or dramatized rituals assist communities with expressing ills and healing them. For example, story-telling is used as a tool for community bonding and cohesion and in turn promoting a space for healthy self-expression.

What is presented in this document is a modest portrayal of how drama and theatre activities can contribute to the overall wellbeing of mental health patients. The experiences documented in this document are a result of a project that was implemented by Noon Creative Enterprise at two public mental health institutions in Cairo; Abassiya Psychiatric Hospital and Helwan Psychiatric Hospital.

The Kamynu Trust, which funds organisations working to improve mental health and wellbeing among marginalised communities, as well as those who apply unconventional and creative approaches, supported the project, all in an attempt to combat stigma around mental health.

Purpose of the Project

Interest in the project began when Dr. Ahmed Sawahel – then head of the Rehabilitation through Work Placements and Activities department approached Noon Creative Enterprise with the idea of creating a theatre performance with some of the in-patients. The purpose of the workshops was two-fold, to contribute to the patients' personal development (everyday life social skills and day-to-day interactions) as well as tackling stigma and creating more social acceptance.

Concurrently, Dr. Shaimaa Mossalam from Abassya hospital also approached Noon for a similar project, but she requested the workshops be held with the out-patients of the children's clinic. The proposed project was to hold two workshops. The first workshop focused on a group of children who frequented the hospital to get treatments and therapy for various physical and mental disabilities. The workshops with the children had a focus on emotional expression and to create a safe space for them to express themselves generally.

The second workshop targeted mothers and caregivers of these children. The hospital was aware that the women needed support, of which it could not provide for them; therefore, the workshops would function as therapeutic activities, creating a safe space for the caregivers to share, express and connect.

Project Methodology

The doctors from both hospitals were able to secure the necessary approvals and permits to enable the accessibility to the hospital and its patients. There were generally no issues that we are aware of in regards to obtaining these permits.

The Kamynu Trust had approached Noon Creative Enterprise for potential collaboration, and the projects with the hospital were a perfect fit with the scope of work that the Trust supported. An application for funding was submitted to the Trust, and it was approved.

The preparation phase included visits to the hospital to survey the space and decide on final logistical preparations as well as specific topics and goals for each group. Noon chose not to be involved in the process of selecting the participants. Noon only specified the maximum number of participants per workshop. Each hospital approached a number of patients and selected the groups.

For the workshop with the children, the hospital chose cases that were particularly difficult and needed extra interventions to assist with therapy. As for the womens group, spaces were given to depressed caregivers in need of therapy who were interested in trying a new approach. In Helwan, the activity was open to patients under article 10, meaning they were non-threatening to self and others, with mild to moderate degrees of mental illness and in need for socializing activities. Those chosen were thought to be able to commit to the duration of the activity. By February 2017 the workshops commenced and each group was attending one session a week.

Essentially, the methods utilised with each group were based on the group's own capabilities and interests. The sessions were designed to accommodate the groups' needs, taking into consideration what kind of exercises would help with their particular ailments or problems. In the case of the Helwan hospital group, they responded to physical activity, so movement and dancing were repeatedly used throughout the sessions. The children's group had a combination of movement and storytelling. The women's group needed more space for verbal communication and sharing, so storytelling exercises were the focus.

Please check annex 1, 2 and 4 for samples of each of the sessions.

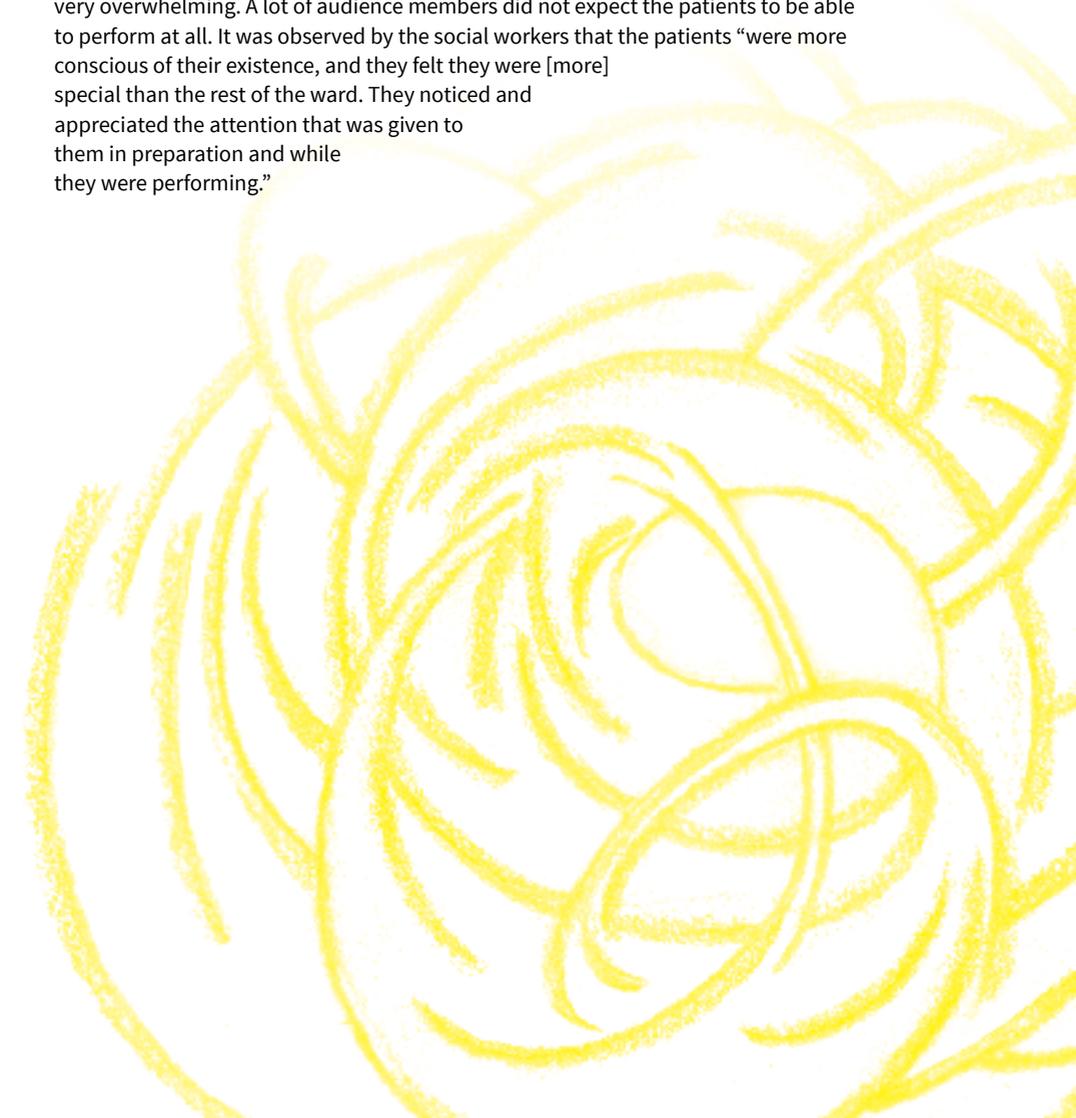
The Helwan Group

The sessions were more structured and always started with movement exercises. Most of the participants had been patients for several years, if not decades. The physical stamina of the patients was very weak, and they could barely stand for 5 minutes at a time without getting tired. For a prolonged period of time, the sessions just focused on warm-ups for the body and exercises for body awareness. As the movements and warm-ups became easier for the participants, the workshop leader made the movements more complex. Over time the patient's characters started to become more visible; they started showing more personality traits.

The participants needed to reach a level of comfort with their bodies first, particularly since some of them had problems with coherent speech. The exercises focused on movement and rhythm, group cohesion, and creating images or statues, all to reach a point where a level of bodily comfort was achieved and where voice was not a necessity.

As the group started bonding, the work commenced to find a specific story or topic to be chosen for the final performance. The group decided they wanted to tell their own personal stories. To show, who they were, including their illnesses, symptoms and struggles.

The group was able to successfully perform in December 2017 to an audience that comprised of other patients, nurses, doctors, students and staff. The performance was a series of personal stories being told by each patient. The feedback that followed was very overwhelming. A lot of audience members did not expect the patients to be able to perform at all. It was observed by the social workers that the patients "were more conscious of their existence, and they felt they were [more] special than the rest of the ward. They noticed and appreciated the attention that was given to them in preparation and while they were performing."



Abassya Group : The Children

The focus chosen in the children's group was exploration of their emotions. Sessions included a mixture of exercises that involved movement as well as verbal expression. Since the group included a range of disabilities and mental health issues, equal participation among the children was occasionally challenging.

Within the process of emotional exploration and awareness, the children were invited to think about what they thought emotions were, what were the different kinds of emotions they had, and how emotions could be visually represented.

To stimulate their body awareness and to get them moving, exercises involving animal movement and behaviour were utilised. The children engaged in various movement exercises using different rhythms and sounds. All exercises were introduced as games, which they enjoyed.

Working with children can be challenging in terms of managing their energy levels. In order to moderate or manage the fluctuating energy levels, various exercises or games were used within a session. For example, an exercise that requires vigorous movement was followed with one that focused on breathing and meditation techniques.

The children then started working on developing the story for their performance. Through a series of story-telling exercises they came up with a story named "Arnoub" (Bunny Rabbit). The story essentially was about them and the various experiences they go through, all set in the animal kingdom. The show included puppets, which they made themselves. In December 2017, the children performed their play twice to other children, parents, doctors and nurses in the hospital.

Abassya Group : The Women

The workshops were offered to women caregivers as a non-intrusive activity in which to engage while waiting for their children's sessions to end. From the onset, it was clear that the group of women had a real need to share and be heard. Initially, most of the session time was dedicated to them checking-in and sharing their stories. Once trust was established between them, they seemed uninterested in any other exercises other than talking and sharing. The instructor was aware that the session shouldn't turn into talk therapy, so in order to refocus on the theatrical goal, they had to frequently be steered away from talking during the whole session.

Like the other groups, the women's group engaged in various exercises - movement and storytelling. They decided that they would focus on telling their own stories and struggles. They wanted to share their stories with the world, and they realised that they weren't going through these struggles alone, that others shared similar experiences. A message sent by one of the women expressed the effect of the sessions clearly, she wrote, "Today we played 3 games that were very tiring, but made me energised. We had fun and laughed, and we were able to escape this feeling of suffocation we live with."

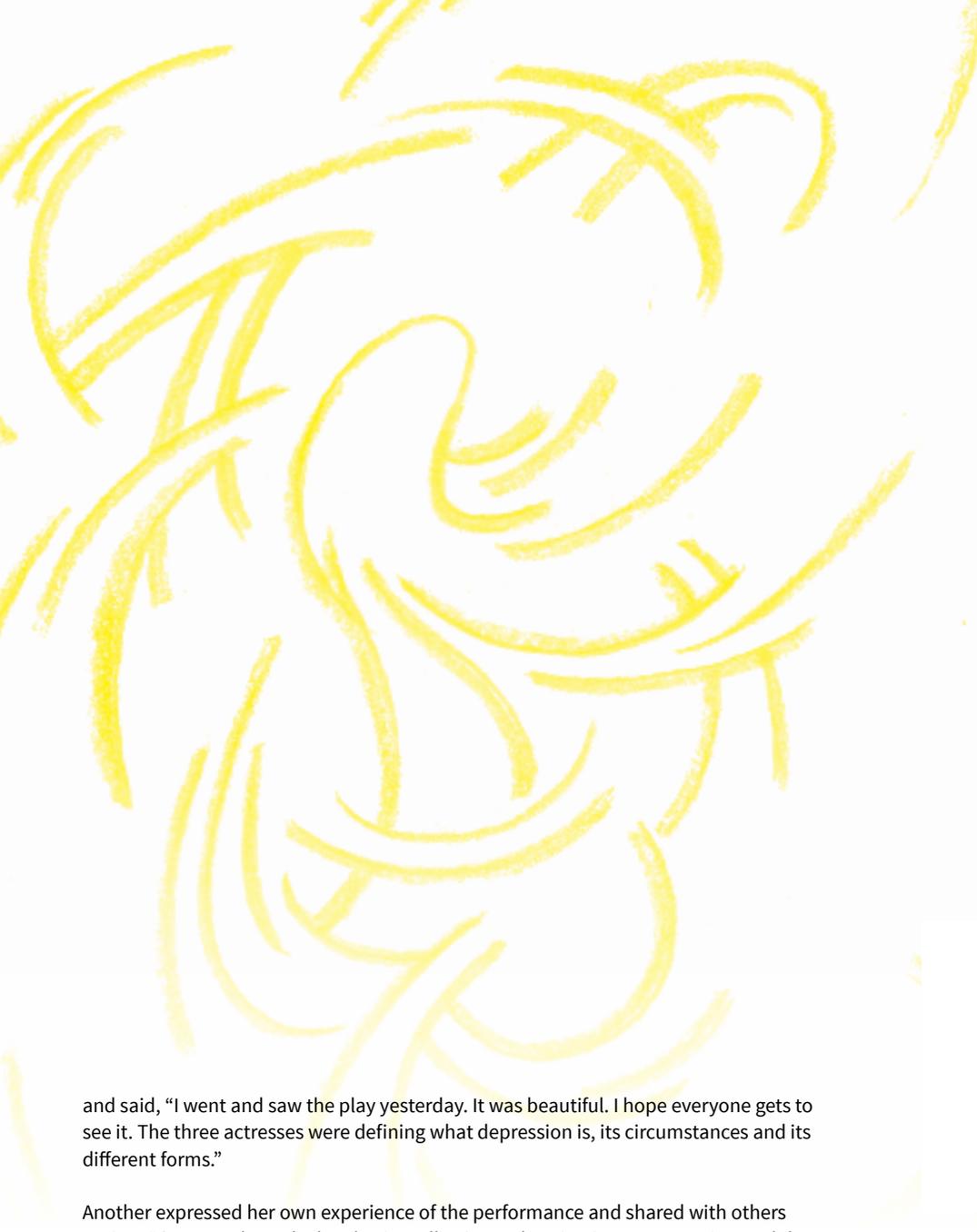
Their stories were recorded and edited, then given back to them to be reviewed. Some reviewed their own stories and others wanted their stories to be checked by someone other than themselves.

Throughout this experience, all the women started becoming more confident and gained more independence. Some were able to get jobs and others got remarried. With the changes in their personal situations and unforeseeable circumstances, the women found it difficult to be committed to performing. For example, one of the women who had undergone leg surgery during the program shared with the group her disappointment in not being able to continue; "I'm still keen on coming, but the leg surgery I did is not allowing me to move. I miss you all and I wish I could finish the program, but it's really out of my hands."

They still wanted their stories to be heard; though, so a decision to bring in professional actresses was reached. Their stories were changed from long monologues into scenes, and out of that process the performance "Ta' Sakena" was created.

Ta' Sakena takes audiences on a journey of motherhood interrupted by depression, mental health and femininity. The stories of these brave women were first performed at the British Council in December 2017. It was later performed in various venues and festivals such as the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (Cairo), Theatre is a Must Festival (Alexandria), Women by the Sea Arts Festival (El Gouna, Hurghad), and is currently scheduled to perform in Lebanon in September.

Ultimately, the instructor would have preferred it if the women had gone through the experience of performing; however, it is clear from their feedback that they are still very connected to the show. They relate to their stories and those of the other women whenever they attend the performances. One of the women attended the performance



and said, “I went and saw the play yesterday. It was beautiful. I hope everyone gets to see it. The three actresses were defining what depression is, its circumstances and its different forms.”

Another expressed her own experience of the performance and shared with others saying, “I’m very pleased. The play is really nice. It does justice to our stories, and there were no mistakes. They intertwined our stories together so the audience couldn’t separate them and sympathise with one over the others. The message it left us with was really beautiful.” Some even wanted to attend more than once and were asking how “to hear [their] story again,” as well as when it was going to be performed again.

Success Stories and Impact:

In the beginning, the patients involved didn’t completely understand the process they were going to go through. They weren’t aware of the impact it would have on them. The impact of the workshops was not only palpable during the sessions, but also once the final performances were done. Doctors could really see the development, but more importantly, the patients acted and felt different.

Advancing personal skills and creating social cohesion

In the Helwan group, participants began to display social skills advancement. They were more motivated and committed to the sessions and started showing up on time. Awareness of the days and months started to form, which wasn’t really the case beforehand. They would notice if a session had been cancelled and inquire the following session about why it was cancelled. These were all changes that were recorded by the social workers and nurses working with the patients.

They went from a life that was sedated, to more active, and they became more aware of their surroundings. Initially, there were some reservations regarding men and women mixing. There is a general rule that men and women aren’t supposed to mix, but for this particular exercise they were allowed to. They started learning each other’s names and learning about each other’s stories. This led them to asking after one another and forming social bonds.

Also several changes in behaviors were observed by the social workers. One is quoted saying that “In the beginning, the patients didn’t want to leave their wards, and now we find them ready and waiting in anticipation. There were patients that barely spoke. Now they sing, act and complain. They have changed and are collaborating with each other.”

Another observation made by the social workers related to the changes in behavior was made. They said, that they felt “there is a complete shift since Ms. Nada’s arrival. There are changes in the relationships between the patients; there is more collaboration between them. There are two patients who suffer from intellectual disability that have started to show improvements in their intellectual functioning. They’ve become more energetic physically and that has made a huge difference.”

Friendships started forming and the participants started looking out for each other. If someone wasn’t there, they would be concerned, and they’d have to ask about the reasons behind their absence. Those who were there would take snacks for their colleagues who missed the session. They also knew when a colleague was missing due to a doctor’s appointment or if they were going through a rough time.

All this interest and concern started only after the workshops took place. It is safe to assume that the workshops strengthened the social bonds between the patients and pushed them to become more socially engaged.

The women at Abassya hospital expressed their gratefulness for their participation in the workshops. They were able to go from strangers waiting for their children in the same

space to a strong support group. Many of the women had assumed that they were alone and that their suffering wasn't experienced by anyone else. The workshops changed their misconception. They realised that other parents go through the same struggles. In fact, some have identical stories. Their support for each other lasted beyond the workshops, and they still get in touch with each other to share and encourage.

They were very keen on attending the sessions, and missing any would affect them. One woman who had missed a session because of a new job shared her agitation by saying "I'm very upset that I couldn't go to the hospital on Saturday. I'm under a lot of pressure at work, but I would really like to go to the session and tell you about my daily routine and how happy I am at work." Some also shared how being part of the group had affected them. Another said, "Being part of this group made me stronger. I really love it. It has helped me a lot and my life has become so much better. I've changed. I was below zero now I'm above 100."

Similar observations were made in the childrens group. One of the children had very low self-esteem, and after the theatre activity and performing, her self-esteem has gone up as noticed by her doctor. Multiple friendships formed between the participating children and some even extended beyond the workshop.

In-patients leaving the hospital

Several patients who were involved in the workshops were observed to be exponentially improving and were later dismissed from the hospital. It is safe to assume that participation in the workshops was partially responsible. According to one of the nurses, the theatre activity allowed participating patients to express themselves freely, which improved their general mood and well-being on the day of the activity as well as within their wards.

Creating new and enjoyable experiences

The workshops allowed the patients to have new experiences that contributed to their self worth. For example, the Helwan group were allowed to get new clothes to wear for the performances, and the women put on make-up with the assistance of a volunteer from the hospital. All of the patients come from very humble backgrounds and don't have the means to afford getting new clothes or make-up. Their belongings are mostly donations. Receiving new clothes and special treatment contributed positively to their morale and overall wellbeing.

Similarly, as noted by Dr. Ranim, the children's group at Abbassia felt pride and ownership of making their own puppets, choosing the material, colours and design.

Inspiring the caretakers

The outcome of the workshop prompted several doctors and nurses to want to include within their own work theatre and drama techniques. Some of the student nurses at Helwan Psychiatric Hospital wanted to create some scenes with manic-depressive patients so they approached the instructor to receive assistance and guidance. A few of the social workers present during the activity talked about using some of the techniques with the patients and wanting to create more theatre activities in the hospital.



Challenges

Developing the performance

With the Helwan in-patients, a challenge (but in effect a success as well) was that once a lot of them started speaking and expressing themselves, they improved, leading to their dismissal from the hospital. Obviously, this is an achievement for the patient and should not be underplayed. However, it hindered the development of the performance because stories had to be removed and changed. Many times, the removed stories were the most complex and coherent ones.

This particular performance was to be utilised to raise awareness around mental health issues and to alleviate stigma socially. But the fact that several patients left and couldn't commit once they were out of the hospital created some difficulties. The performance couldn't be shown in its entirety.

Repeating the performance

Originally, the Helwan group's performance was supposed to be toured and used to tackle stigma around mental health issues. Ideally, it would have circulated in schools and universities in Helwan. Unfortunately, the idea has been dismissed by the hospital due to changing staff and dismissal of patients. On the upside, staff that participated are now keeping the activity going and have plans to create new plays.

Timing and commitments

With regards to challenges in the children's group, the school year (ie: holidays and exams) affected attendance and disrupted the workflow. Currently, most of the children are no longer visiting the hospital, and some have been moved from the children's clinic to the youth clinic.

What next?

Further steps and ideas on how to develop the project

During the workshop in Helwan hospital, there was a trial involving some patients from the addiction ward. Many of them were youth and teenagers.

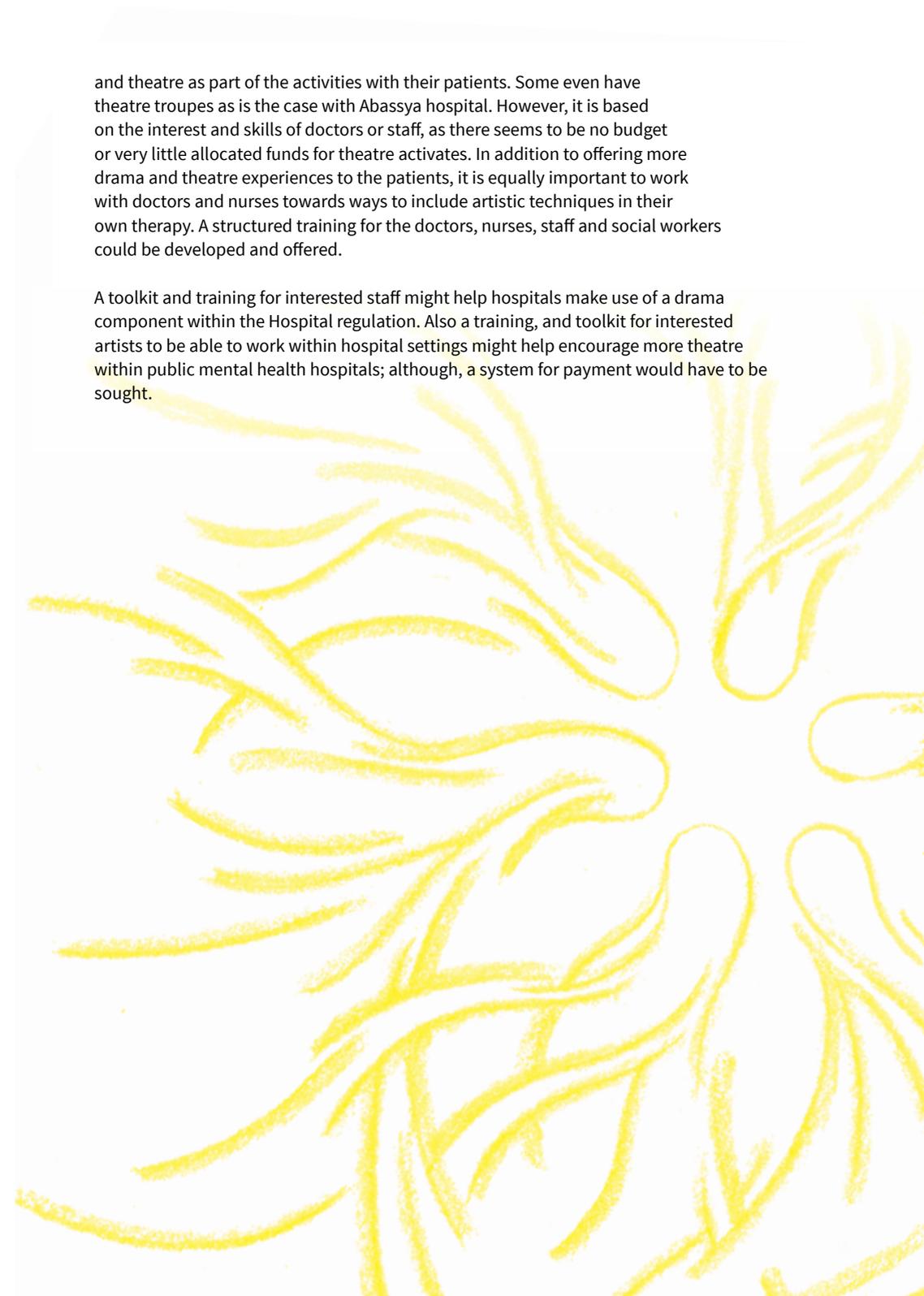
These patients tend to have short stays at the hospital. They didn't particularly enjoy the workshop since they were intellectually more advanced and couldn't commit to the program. There was, however, an interest from the hospital to create a special activity for the addiction and youth wards.

Although the trial wasn't successful it did not mean that a workshop dedicated to this group wouldn't be. The hospital and Noon would like to create a similar project with this group in the future.

In most of the public mental health institutions, it is part of their regulation to use drama

and theatre as part of the activities with their patients. Some even have theatre troupes as is the case with Abassya hospital. However, it is based on the interest and skills of doctors or staff, as there seems to be no budget or very little allocated funds for theatre activities. In addition to offering more drama and theatre experiences to the patients, it is equally important to work with doctors and nurses towards ways to include artistic techniques in their own therapy. A structured training for the doctors, nurses, staff and social workers could be developed and offered.

A toolkit and training for interested staff might help hospitals make use of a drama component within the Hospital regulation. Also a training, and toolkit for interested artists to be able to work within hospital settings might help encourage more theatre within public mental health hospitals; although, a system for payment would have to be sought.



Annex 1

In-patients at Helwan Hospital – Sample Session Outline

Duration 1hr- 2hrs

Warm-up – physically follow the leader

How do we feel now? With sound and movement

Statues

Statues started to dance

Singing together

Thank you to everyone

Wave

Annex 2

Children's workshop - Sample Session Outline

Duration 1hr

Physical Warm-up

How do we feel now? With sound and movement

Talked about how different parts of the body can feel different things

Run, jump, sit, walk

Different body parts relate to different emotions (pain, excitement, sadness, anger, hope, fear, tickling and happiness)

Through movement and walking around – express in their bodies these different emotions

Talked about Who had had similar feelings

Group rhythm

Sang a song

Wave

Annex 3

Arnoub (Bunny Rabbit) The script of the puppet show performed by the children at Abassia Psychiatric Hospital

Narrator: Once a upon a time, a huge bunny lived in the animal kingdom. He was very mischievous and used to stomp and make noise. He also liked to play tricks on his animal neighbors.

Then one day his neighbors complained.

The neighbors:

Stop it bunny...

Be quite bunny...

That's it, we've had it bunny...

We're tired bunny...

Narrator: Bunny was very upset, and he decided to go alone into the forest and sit by a big tree.

The Tree: What's the matter bunny? Why are sitting all alone?

Bunny: Because I don't have any friends.

The Tree: And why don't you have any friends?

Bunny: Because I've had enough. Everytime I befriend someone, hit them and they get upset.

The Tree: I have an idea.

Narrator: The Tree whispers something and Bunny responds:

Bunny: Ok

Narrator: They had a plan... Are you ready to see what it is?

The Tree: Oh no Bunny, a tree has fallen on the road, and a duck and her ducklings are stuck. Could you help them?

Narrator: Bunny remembered that he is strong and can easily lift the tree. So he ran... and did that.

Mother Duck: Oh thank you so much Bunny.

(one of the ducklings gave Bunny a kiss)

Narrator: This was the first time that anyone said "Thank You" to Bunny.

He returned to the Tree and said:

Bunny: Did you see what happened? The duckling gave me kiss and thanked me.

The Tree: See I told you, you can show your strength through helping others.

Narrator: and bunny was happy again - and after some time...

The Tree: Oh no Bunny, the birds told me that a very big rock is about to roll and fall of the hill. If that happens it will land on Lion's house. You have to help!!!

Narrator: So Bunny headed to Lion's house and knocked on the door.

Lion: WHOOO Is It????

Bunny: It's me Bunny.

Lion: Go away. You are Bunny who constantly plays tricks on everyone.

Bunny: There's no time Lion, there's a big rock that is about to land on your house.

Lion: I don't believe you...Go away!!!

Bunny: Look out the window and you'll see.

Narrator: Lion goes to his window and looks up.

Lion: You're right... There is a rock and it's about to fall on my house.

Narrator: Bunny went to remove the rock.

Lion: Thank you... You've saved my house, and as a thank you, why don't you have lunch with us?

Narrator: Bunny agreed and went into Lion's house.

They ate and drank.

Lion: Why was 6 afraid of 7? Because 7, 8, 9.

And they told jokes and laughed together.

Until they realized it was getting dark.

Bunny: Oh wow! it's very late. I must leave now, but thank you Lion.

Narrator: Bunny ran to the Tree and said:

Bunny: Thank you Tree... Now I have friends.

Narrator: And they lived happily ever after

The End.

Annex 4

Women's workshop - Sample Session Outline

Duration 1hr

Physical Warm-up

Check-in circle

Exploring the topic of asking without shame

Exploring vulnerability

Asking vs. demanding scenes

Giving others the change to give

Statues on all these discussions

Sharing on how everyone felt about these topics

Closure