Theatre as Therapy: Defining Sanity and Normality in Louis Nowra’s Cosi

Veena Sharma
Research Scholar, Department of English, HPU, Shimla-171005

Abstract
Insanity is described as a state of an individual’s mental distortion or sickness, creating demons in his or her mind due to certain social and interpersonal causes. The usual response to such an individual is to exclude him from society. The individual, also due to certain limitations and incapacities, draws a shell around himself wherein he hides his repressed soul under the guise of insanity. But, this insanity is not always a breakdown, it may be a breakthrough when potentially liberated and renewed. The present study analyses Cosi, an internationally acclaimed play by one of the famous Australian playwrights, Louis Nowra. It is a story of love, life and theatre, where humour serving as redemption mocks at the follies of our society besides giving vent to the melancholy of the mentally ill patients. The major focus of this study is on the Nowra’s vision of therapeutic theatre. It is also analysed that how the study of this dark comedy reveals the real picture of the Australian society and of the world at large. The discussion will largely focus on the specific needs and visions of the mentally ill patients, and how this comedy exposes the real picture of professional theatre.

Introduction
Set in a Melbourne mental asylum in 1971 suburban backyard, Cosi (1992) takes a compassionate look at the lives of those people who are considered failures in society. A bewildered young novice director, Lewis is hired by a state-run psychiatric institution to direct a variety show as a part of occupational therapy for the inmates. Strong ties of companionship are built among Lewis and the cast of inmates that help in validating their visions. The bond that is formed between them serves as a protective barricade against the tumultuous realities and vicissitudes of life in the so-called sane world outside.

The central action of the main plot Mozart’s opera, Cosi Fan Tutte, which is rehearsed and finally performed by the inmates, becomes a journey of their romantic revelation and self-renovation. It also reveals openly the harsh realities of Australian society and of the globe at large. The repressed desires and passions of the patients that come out during rehearsals are culminated in the confident performance of opera in the end. In the play, human relationships are examined through love, betrayal, alienation and acceptance. It poses such uncomfortable questions that where does the real madness lie—inside or outside the mental asylum and that what it means to be normal.

Lewis accommodates everyone’s expectations in the rehearsals. A lithium-addict pianist Zac’s out-of-place accordion music is given place. An ex-criminal lawyer, Henry’s want of dressing the soldiers as Australians and not Albanians is fulfilled. Seductive Cherry’s electroconvulsive shocks instead of mesmerism are put in. Roy’s fantasized vision of aristocratic childhood is also type-cast.

The Mozart’s opera in the play “ridicules our prejudices and popular institutions,” as is described by Gerry Turcotte (“Frankenstein’s Mozart” xi). The cast becomes Nowra’s mouthpiece for a dig at directors. Roy detests all directors who are tyrants and he satirically remarks, “For killing an actor he’d get life, for killing a director he’d get eternal gratitude” (38). Doug, a dangerous pyromaniac, bitterly mocks at the licentious nature of directors who, he says, direct only to get the chance of fucking the actresses.

Roy tells Julie who is the happiest one to get a role, “If you poke the director, you’ll get the best role” (36). When Lewis is not able to convince Ruth, an obsessive compulsive neurotic, he becomes a little sad and is not able to concentrate. Roy therefore sarcastically remarks, “He is testy because he
didn’t get a poke!” and “He is tense as a ram waiting to be put in the ewe paddock” (39). Roy exposes the harsh reality about theatre, “Democracy is foreign to theatre . . . it’s just that you want to pander to the mob” (63). Nowra by giving such pungent dialogues to his characters brings forth the fact that deadly sins like greed and lust have entered today’s theatre which must be replaced by honesty, trust and respect for one another, as is done by Lewis in Cosi.

Nowra’s theatre, however, is different as is portrayed in Cosi where each actor contributes his own vision to the role. It makes them feel part of the show. Lewis does not force his direction on the cast. His artistic and brilliant manipulation of mentally ill patients enables them to blossom and give their successful performance in the end, though comically imperfect. Lewis is happy to see every patient coming out of his shell completely transformed. Though dysfunctional, these mentally ill patients are far away from hypocrisy. He takes them to a world that was as far removed from the depressing asylum as possible.

Cosi satirizes the government and its policy of rehabilitation of the mentally disturbed people. The theatre which is provided to the inmates is described in scene i of Act I as: A burnt out theatre. It is a day outside but pitch black inside the theatre (1). Such an unhealthy and dismal atmosphere is offered to the patients who in fact, deserve extra care. The inhuman treatment meted out to them also becomes clear when Roy describes asylums as “the most inefficient places on this earth” (4). Nowra chooses the burnt-out theatre as venue for the performance of the playlet in Cosi to bring to light peoples’ apathy towards mentally ill patients who are regarded as misfits for civilized society and thus are always given cold shoulders.

The play exposes the contemporary community-psychiatry and hospital care provided to mental patients. As the report of The Medical Journal of Australia in 1997 informed, “Half-way houses, community care . . . . Come on, the government cuts the cost and chucks them [the patients] on the street” (Rosin 640). The asylums with serious overcrowding and poor hygiene cater less to their needs and more to their deterioration. On top of it all, the social workers who engage themselves for human cause, as they call it, are just pretentious social servants hunting for their own publicity. Justin, the social worker in the play is always seen in a hurry: “Love to be here, but I’ve got a day of meetings. Rush, rush. Where would the world be without social workers? (7)

Nowra fully agrees with the famous Scottish psychiatrist, R. D. Laing’s proposition that “to call a person mad is to stigmatize him. Therefore, a mentally ill person should be allowed to live with his mad ecstasies because once reaching the depths of his madness, he would find his real self” (“Trial by Madmen” xvi). This is what Lewis does in the play; he directs the cast’s odd and eccentric visions only to transform them in the end.

Laing opposed the psychiatric treatment of mentally ill persons by taking their behavioural outbursts as symptomatic of some mental dysfunction. He suggests, rather to take these as valid descriptions of painful experiences in their lives which are required to be understood in terms of social, intellectual and cultural dimensions (Web 2010).

The characters in Cosi are unable to manage their social surroundings and choose madness as it seems the sanest course of action to them for their survival. This characterization is based on Nowra’s concept of human psyche. In an interview by Jeremy Ridgman, Now Human mind works like a pressure cooker where various ingredients in the form of events and circumstances get mixed up. It responds to
personal, social and other forms of pressures which if not oriented properly can make one’s personality paradoxical, irrational, dysfunctional and full of conflicts. (123)

The society and particularly family play a major role in making a person mad. If a person is unable to conform to the conflicting expectations of the society or of his peers, he becomes mentally distressed. Our duty lies in taking care of such a person to restore his healthy state of being as is done by Lewis in the play.

Doug, the most dangerous but pitiable character in the play, was having an unresolved problem with his mother as he tells Lewis, “My ego had taken a severe battering from her . . . I had better resolve it, stop her treating me like I was still a child. It made some sort of cosmic sense. I had to stand up to her . . . to give me the upper hand in our relationship” (19). These unresolved tensions and conflicts with his mother led him to do some manly act— of burning her cats and thus satisfying his ego. But his act of vengeance turned into a traumatic experience for him and eventually made him pyromaniac. He could never reconcile to the fact that he killed his mother. He sets the theatre to fire and then shouts, “Don’t blame me, blame my mother” (23).

Julie likes the pitch black darkness which she never finds in the lighted wards. She doesn’t like to be home as she tells Lewis, “[Laughing] My parents had me committed. They think it’s sort of like a holiday. Those dirty white and olive walls give me the heebie jeebies, they really do. Cosi gave me something to think about, something to do. [She laughs] See, I’m happy coming to this burnt out theatre” (36). She replaces love with junk for she never found it while being with her parents. As Carl Gustav Jung puts, “For every failures in conscious life, there arises a compensation in the unconscious for it” (241), as happens in the case of Julie.

Similarly, Roy’s painful fantasy of lost aristocratic maternal origins becomes, what Veronica Kelly observes as “a compensatory vision and a protective shelter for a lost spirit” (Theatre of Nowra 94). He dreams, “A world that was like my childhood. . . . servants dancing on finger tips, French tutors, lullabies goodnight sung to me by my beautiful mother, summer days and lemonade brought to me by a maid. . . That’s the world I wanted Cosi Fan Tutte to capture —recapture. (64)

R. D. Laing describes speech disorders as “a valid expression of distress symbolic of person’s misery, inadequacy and lack of confidence” (Web. 2010). Henry due to his stuttering speech and reserved nature is the most difficult person to work with in the cast. His autistic nature and stuttering speech act as a defence mechanism against his failure as a lawyer and betrayal by his wife. Lewis gives him his lines to rehearse, but he refuses to say them. He behaves as if he is not part of the rehearsal. Lewis boosts Henry that he is not a failure.

As Peter Holloway observes, “A person’s fears are objectified by compulsive eating, smoking and drinking expressing terror of the inner, metaphysical void” (539). Such a character constructed by Nowra in the play is Cressy, a compulsive eater, who spins a parody of a standard asylum patient’s hard-luck story, concerning a childhood spent pointing and retrieving for her father since they couldn’t afford a hunting dog: “Those lakes can get cold when you’re swimming with a dead duck in your mouth” (21).

When reality becomes harsh and unbearable, a person gets alienated from it. Zac designs a disgustingly bare set with no garden and no seashore. He is against realism and says, “If I could put up with reality I wouldn’t be in here” (62). Ruth is obsessed with counting and distinguishing illusions from reality. She remarks, “I can handle something being an illusion or real but not at the same time” (26).

Whatever be the reasons of their mental conditions, the cast love their rehearsals as an escape from their dreary asylum routine into an alternative and fantastically pictured ideal world. The urbane poise of the high comic vision is celebrated amidst the improvisational chaos of Cosi wherein obsessional and over-mediated asylum inmates rehearse and produce Mozart’s opera:

\[
\text{Happy is the man who calmly takes life as he finds it} \\
\text{and through the vicissitudes of life} \\
\text{lets himself be ruled by reason}
\]
what makes another weep
will make him laugh
and despite the tempests of his life
he will find serenity and peace. (84)

Justin, the social worker, rightly said in the beginning of the play that these mentally ill patients are normal people with different visions. Lewis understands this and thus responds to their extraordinary visions and he becomes a therapist for them by reconstructing their situations and understanding their fears. A therapist, as is defined by R. D. Laing in dialogue with R. Evans, “actually means an attendant, a person who does not dispute the individual claims or numb the fears with medication but empathise with the patients” (80-84). He enables the patient to revitalize his latent potentialities. Lewis’ dealing with the inmates exactly matches with this definition.

The madness as is put by R. D. Laing, could act as “a transformative journey wherefrom a patient returns wiser and more grounded in his normal state” (Web. 2010). In the play, the mentally ill patients are transformed from timid beings into confident outgoing individuals when handled with love and care. They metamorphose together responding to each other’s emotions and backing up one another sinking in their initial differences. Lewis also learns that it helps to be a little crazy to have your dreams fulfilled. He who had been believing initially that love is not so important nowadays gradually changes his mind to affirm that without love the world wouldn’t mean much. He begins to dislike political correctness as political ideologies are always varying but love remains constant. It is here in such a world of fantasy, illusion and madness that a true love unfolds itself—love for others despite their inefficiencies.

The play ends on a positive note. The patients try to forget their dysfunctional past to go ahead in life as Zac and Ruth. Roy feels happy as his dream of performing Mozart’s opera is fulfilled. Lewis and the cast enjoyed together the elixir of their lives with zest and energy during rehearsals and they put up a final performance confidently. They shared an open space where they gathered to lament, to celebrate, to enact their dreams and visions, and where they were offered freedom to display themselves.

Cosi enables Nowra to reach out to audiences telling them that every other person has one or the other kind of limitation or deficiency. One must laugh at it to evade the compulsion to suffer it. On the one hand, Cosi looks affectionately at life through the eyes of those people who are out of alignment with their surroundings but are more true than others, and on the other, it humorously touches madness and pays a tribute to the healing energy of madness and the transformative power of theatre.

Nowra also gives a wonderful message through Cosi to the world of theatre that it should encourage the audience to focus more on the potential of people who suffer from any kind of mental illness or deformity. Nobody in this world is disabled but only differently-abled. And this different ability can make a difference if given expression and recognition. It empowers such a person to understand and cope up with the world around him. It also gives the message of having commitment and hope in everyday life as is expressed in Lewis’ and his cast’s persevered efforts in giving their performance. Nowra links theatre with social welfare.

References