

Learning to Play: A Metadrama Movie of Play and Imperfection

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The documentary “Learning to Play” captures the story of a group of individuals in an acting workshop program. But there’s a twist. The movie presents workshops and performances in actual time, resulting in metadrama: a play inside a film.

The film elicits further intrigue with other twists and turns.

The workshop director’s expertise goes far beyond acting. Acting skills are not even the focus. Also, these workshops differ from the norm and the participants are unique non-actors.

These practicing actors are youth and adults living with autism. Filmed at a mental health center in Ohio, the acting workshops filmed are part of a larger treatment program. With innovative design, the program emphasizes the development of social and communication skills and the reduction of unwanted behaviors.

These acting workshops serve as a metaphorical playground, one that mimics the real-life use of play for growth.

Many parents tell their kids to head outside and play. Individuals living with autism don’t even open the door. Here, we see courageous clients with autism not only heading out the door but also learning to negotiate their unscripted social environment. All while being filmed.

To promote authenticity, the scenes in this documentary are unfiltered. Everyone is real. Everything is exposed. Every part of this is on purpose.

While practicing the play, performing it, and being filmed, these courageous clients often don’t know what to expect. And while they facilitate, the clinicians don’t either. The filmmakers must constantly adjust.

Dealing with uncertainty is the foundation of treatment at this center. Despite general trends, the directing clinician endorses an approach wherein social development requires trial and error amidst unpredictability.

No rules. No rigid guidelines. No predictable outcomes. Just trying, failing, and trying again. All while facing the anxiety that might occur with feeling exposed and completely unsure of oneself.

The clinical director inspires everybody to experiment, readjust after mistakes, and continue their effort. Like any playground, there are tears, frustrations, and the need for help and encouragement.

Life is messy for everybody. Viewers relate to falling down and getting up again. This film reminds that struggle and overcoming adversity are inevitable parts of life.

Facing hardship and handling ambiguity with grit is central to the film.

This is a heart-wrenching and heart-warming documentary. As it shows the heroic, positive growth for the workshop members, it will inspire. It leaves us with a sense of shared humanity and renewed courage for uncertain times.

“Learning to Play” announces that positive change is possible for anyone, with or without a challenging diagnosis. To attain this possibility, we all have to face our fears, allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and constantly roll with the punches.