

Leatta plays popular game "Oh Great One" at Step Up on Second, walk-in activity center for the mentally ill and homeless.

Off the Street and Onto the Stage

Mentally ill and homeless people act out their troubles at improvisation workshop

By DAVID COLKER

Leatta woke up in a state mental hospital in Idaho a couple of years ago and was told that she had gone on a rampage on a golf course. She had run around all 18 holes, removing the flags from the holes and tossing them on the ground.

When she picked a song to sing before a small gathering in Santa Monica on a recent Saturday morning, it was Patsy Cline's "I Pall to Pieces."

Rodney was once found by the California Highway Patrol under his truck on the shoulder of the San Diego Freeway. He warned the officers that there were Viet Cong snipers in the vicinity and that they should take cover too.

On that same Saturday morning, Rodney made a peace sign out of Play Don and presented it to the gathering in the manner of a carnival pitchman.

Welcome to the weekly theater-comedy improvisation workshop sponsored by Step Up on Second, a walk-in activity center for the mentally ill and the homeless.

"It's all about keeping the kid in these people alive," said Rahla Kahn, an actress

who has been giving her "playsops"—one of the best-attended activities on the Step Up schedule—for four years. "When you are a little kid, everything is possible. The dreams you have seem so real. For these people, the dreams ended a long time ago. I use improvisation games to give them permission to get up there and do things.

"The goal is to get back to the curious, playful place we all once had."

The playshop and a sketching class are the two arts programs at Step Up, a nonprofit organization founded in 1984 by Susan Derapsey, whose son is a schizophrenic. "It's a good release of emotions for the people here," said Dempsey, looking around the former art and picture frame warehouse on Second Street, now furnished with donated furniture. Step Up clients were sitting at tables talking, standing in line for lunch, resting on cots, looking through donated second-hand clothing and signing up for showers. In one corner, a man repeatedly played "Somewhere Out There" on an upright piano.

"The programs make people feel good about what they do," said Dempsey, whose

organization is supported primarily with county and federal funds. "For someone who might feel they are not worth anything, that's very important."

The sketching class meets Wednesdays and is taught by a volunteer, Mary Mackie-Hagerth of Pacific Palisades.

Three earnest Step Up clients joined her for a recent session and another took his place on a stool, quietly waiting to be drawn. Anthony, 27, went to work immediately, working intensely with broad strokes as he drew Carl's face. Although he worked quickly, the portrait that resulted was a more than fair representation of Carl.

Anthony stood back and looked impatiently at his drawing from several angles. He seemed unsure about what to do next, even after talking over the drawing with Mackie-Hagerth, who urged him to include more detail.

It was important to him that he get it right. "If I can draw something, it's almost like I can control the world," said Anthony, who lives in Santa Monica. "You can create your own little worlds. If you get really good at it, other people will look at what

you have done and they can enter into the world you have created."

Helen, who wore a wool cap and a flowered dress, kept up a steady stream of comic patter as she drew, sometimes lapsing into a mock Russian accent to get a laugh. It was not possible to get a straight answer out of her.

How long has she been in the class?

"I've been in a class of my own all my life," Helen retorted with a sense of timing that Groucho Marx would have admired.

In her younger years, she was a comedian, she said, and her patter is full of references to writers and performers. It was apparent by her multicolored portrait of Carl that she has also had experience in drawing, but she seemed most interested in entertaining her classmates.

"This girl was beautiful ballerina in old country," Helen vamped, gesturing toward Melanie, who was quietly drawing next to her. "Now she is great artiste."

Melanie, a diminutive, soft-spoken young woman, laughed shyly. "She is good for my ego," Melanie said.

Melanie, who works as a pet groomer, fashioned a portrait of Carl in dark gray and peach. She had not drawn before she joined the class a year and a half ago. "When I started, you couldn't tell male from female when I drew a face," she said. "Then you start to get it I practiced at home. I keep a book of drawings and watch my progress."

The portrait captured a pensive look in Carl's eyes. Melanie worked in details with a sure hand.

"I think she could sell her work," Mackie-Hagerth said.

A tall, gregarious man, who is a client of Step Up but not in the class, walked over to watch her draw. Then he spoke to Carl. "You never looked better, young man," he said. "This woman has put a magic wand to this painting."

Melanie blushed a bit, but she also beamed.

The quiet of the sketch class was in sharp contrast to the rambunctiousness of the Saturday improvisation session later that same week, which was attended by 18 Step Up clients. Kahn began it, as she always does, with everyone standing in a circle, singing the Rodgers and Hammerstein standard "Getting to Know You."

The scene was nothing like her first visit to Step Up in 1985.

Kahn, who believes in Norman Cousins' widely promoted theory that laughter can have a therapeutic effect, was filling in for a friend who routinely showed comedy videos at Step Up to raise the spirits of clients. "I pushed the little video cart around and showed the tapes," Kahn remembered, "and they were literally falling asleep on me as they watched them. I thought, 'Screw this.' I got them off their butts and doing things. I knew all these theater games, and they loved them."

When Dempsey saw how Kahn sparked the Step Up people, she asked her to do a class on a weekly basis, for which Kahn gets a weekly honorarium of \$50. "It's not much, but I needed to get a little something," said Kahn, who recently quit her job at an advertising agency to concentrate on her acting career.

After "Getting to Know You," she had the group play a game called "Oh, Great One," in which the participants take turns being the wisest person in the universe. The others ask questions, to which the "Great One" must answer with the first word that comes to mind.

"Oh, Great One, why are you a vegetarian?"

"Love," answered Nina, a 60-year-old grandmother.

"Oh, Great One, what does theater mean to you?"

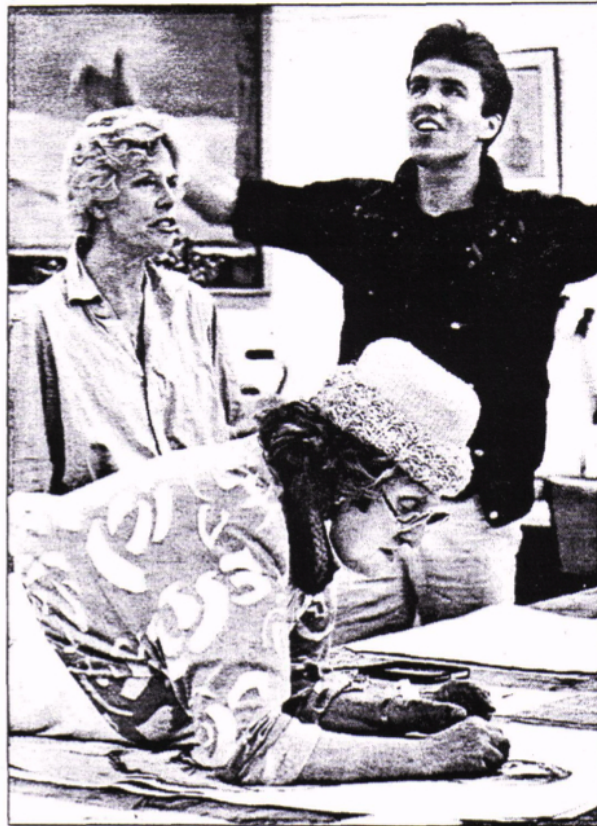
"Greatness," answered Anthony, who later said he would like to be an actor.

"Oh, Great One, what is freedom?"

"Lost," answered Rodney.

Rodney, a Vietnam veteran, has been trying to put his life back together since that day when the CHP officer found him under his truck on the freeway. He said he was on his way to work when he reached a bend in the road that reminded him of where he used to drive in a jungle convoy. Rodney said he flashed back, thinking he was back in the war. He was released after a stay in a Veterans Administration hospital, but he is still haunted by the fear that he will flash back again.

"I don't sleep much," said Rodney, who



Helen sketches portrait while volunteer Mary Mackie-Hagerth and Tony discuss art. Below right, actress Rahla Kahn, whose "playshops" are very popular.



started out the playshop in a polo shirt but soon changed to his customary Army camouflage shirt. "I take pills to knock me out, I'm afraid I'll dream and go back."

"Coming to this gets me out of my shell. I get a rush from this."

Kahn asked everyone to take an everyday object or a Play Doh creation, and sell it like it was a great invention.

Toward the end of the playshop came everyone's activity, singing. One by one, the participants took the microphone in hand, some delivering their songs with

grand gestures, others more sedately.

Bill, an intense man, hardly moved anything but his mouth as he sang a terse version of "Old Man River." Phil sang "Home on the Range" complete with animal imitations; Chris got into her version of "Somewhere Out There"; Tom put a lot of heart into the old Herman's Hermits hit "I'm Henry the VIII, I Am"; Helen worked the room with a Yiddish song, and Nina had everyone join in on "God Bless America."

Leatta, whose life has been like a

country and Western song—bad marriages, abandonment, beatings—sang "I Fall to Pieces" sweetly, with a tear in her voice. She has been singing since she was a young girl, occasionally with bands, and would like to return to performing. Until recently, her home was a tent in the back of a bar, but she now lives at Daybreak, a Santa Monica center that provides transitional housing for women with a history of mental illness. With her life becoming more stable, she dreams of getting back into performing.

"If I ever did make it big, half of what I make would go into buying land and putting up houses for homeless people," she said.

Kahn greatly encourages the playshop participants to dream of better times. "I believe in this kind of stuff. I think I own every book ever put out by Dale Carnegie," she said later, with a laugh, over coffee.

But is it dangerous to encourage their dreams? Could it lead to inflating the hopes of a fragile person?

"I think about that," she said. "But I believe in the word *hope*. Not that I tell them they are going to become rich and big stars or anything like that But I don't think it's bad to give Leatta permission to sing again. Would it be better just to take her dreams away?"

"What's important are the little moments, right now. When they are walking down the street, feeling bummed out about what has happened to them. I want them to think about how good they felt at the playshop."

Kahn has dreams of her own that she freely shared with her playshop. She unabashedly wants a role in a sitcom and spends her weekdays going to auditions and meetings. But she said that even if she is successful, she will continue with the playshops.

"I don't do this just for them," she said. "Even when it's rough, I get something out of coming here too. When I've had a rough week and haven't gotten any callbacks, I'm the one who thinks of the playshop."

Near the end of the playshop, it was time for Tom to sing his song. He had said almost nothing during the two-hour session and when he had, it was in a quiet, gentle voice. He too had once been a performer and had had a hard life.

Tom sat in front of the microphone, a guitar in his lap, for several seconds before he began to quietly strum it like a ukulele. Then, without any performance mannerisms, he sang the 1950s hit "Love Letters in the Sand."

Tom's innocent interpretation of the song had none of the sappiness of the Pat Boone original. No one in the playshop made a sound as he sang.

When it was over, the applause, whoops and whistles were loud and rousing. Kahn stepped up and touched him on the shoulder. "You're shaking," she said to him, quickly drawing her hand away like she had touched something hot.

"I know," he said in a quivering voice, and then he managed a shy smile.

"Did you hear that applause, did you hear what they did at the end of your song?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, the smile growing broader.

"Well, Tom," she said, putting her hand back on his shoulder. "That was for *you*." D