



Off With Her Head!
Breaking Free with Drama Therapy
Erica J. Craig, LCSW, RDT

"Clink!"

The sound of a lock turning and footsteps.

"Now you're locked in forever and you'll never, ever get out. Wah ha ha ha!!!"

Crouched in the corner of the room, I rattled the imaginary bars of my cage.

"Max? Max please let me out! Max? Are you out there?"

"Never! You've been very bad and you're not getting out of there til I say so!" Max paced back and forth in front of my cell. ***"You have to stay in there and think about what you did."***

"Oh. I have been very bad . . . Max? What did I do to end up here again?"

Max sighed, ***"You can't remember? You were mean to me! And you told secrets behind my back! And lies! And now you're being punished!"***

Max was an 11-year old boy with bright, shining eyes and an expressive face. He was on the autism spectrum, suffered from bipolar disorder, and on top of this was dealing with his parents' divorce. It was perhaps not a surprise that he'd been having a tough time of things lately, acting out in school and at home, frequently using "dark" images in his speech, and demonstrating increasingly oppositional behavior. His parents were worried about him. His teachers were concerned. Max was having a hard time verbalizing his feelings and they were coming out in inappropriate ways.

"Max? I'm sorry about all the things I've been doing. I didn't mean to do them. I was just so sad and mad."

Max stopped pacing and looked at me. ***"Sad and mad about what?"*** he asked suspiciously.

"I don't know if I can talk about it," I replied, covering my face with my hands.

"Well, it doesn't matter how you feel!" he shrieked. ***"You still can't act bad! Off with her head!"*** He resumed his marching.

Max's mom had brought him in to see me for the first time two months prior. While she discussed Max's behavior at home, his anxiety, his many medications, and his recent spike in inappropriate behavior, Max perched on the edge of the couch hugging his knees and nibbling on a fingernail. He didn't say much and denied having any questions. I explained a little about the kind of work Max and I would be doing together. Drama therapy is the intentional use of theatre/drama processes to achieve therapeutic goals, which means that much of a typical session is spent "playing" with ideas, rather than talking about them. Oftentimes actual feelings are played out in metaphorical ways. I explained that this method provides an outlet for different types of feelings and offers a space to process and reintegrate feelings in a way that involves not only words, but also incorporates movement and imagination. It allows clients to embody the many different aspects of a given issue, providing the opportunity to "act out" these roles in a safe space.

"Clink!" Max unlocked the door to my cage. **"Get out,"** he growled.

"You're letting me free?!" I exclaimed, **"Yaaay!"**

"No!" he yelled, **"You're going to the judge!"** He marched me across the room to the courthouse.

After several weeks of treatment, Max's mom began to notice small shifts in his behavior. Where he had been rigid, he was more playful. Where there had been complete resistance to talking about feelings, there were occasional moments of openness. The wall was beginning to crumble.

"Hear ye, hear ye! We are here to decide if this person is guilty or innocent!"

I stood before the judge, pretending to nibble my fingernails.

"Prisoner, what is your defense?"

"Your honor," I stammered, **"I'm sorry for the way I acted. It's just that when I get so sad and mad I do things that I don't mean. Please forgive me!"**

The judge sat high on his bench (several chairs stacked on top of each other), deliberating. **"Hmmm,"** he mused, **"OFF WITH HER HEAD!!!"**

As I marched to the gallows, I reflected on Max's and my work together thus far. We had played out similar scenes before, nearly all of them ending in my demise. But this time, I was offered a last minute reprieve.

"I'll let you go on one condition," he whispered, **"Never, ever do it again. If you feel sad and mad, you should tell someone."**

I promised to try.