

ART IMITATING LIFE

Playwright Elly Litvak Finds That Recovery is a Work in Progress

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN drawn to theatre. As a youth at summer camp and in high school, I was in musical plays and community plays – I loved the creative process. I couldn't have guessed the role that theatre would play later on in my life as I learned to cope with mental illness.

After one of many hospitalizations due to manic episodes, I volunteered for a children's theatre company, which led me to work with KYTES, a theatre program for street-involved youth. This inspired me to start Puzzle Factory, a theatre company for people with mental illness. After three years, seven performances and three manic episodes, my play *Who's Crazy Now?* was a hit, but I was burned out.

I moved to British Columbia to heal my life. It was there that I learned about recovery. I was happy to hear that there was hope for me, and I worked hard at getting better. I became a mental health practitioner with a mission to help others recover. However, after 10 years, I grew tired of repeating my recovery message to clients and colleagues. I wondered if there was another way to share my experiences.

A colleague suggested writing another play, which I thought was a great idea. I'd already expressed my mental-patient anger in *Who's Crazy Now?* This time, I wanted to show what it was like to go crazy, be crazy and, most important, how I got better. I decided to call the play *Now Who's Crazy Now?*

I knew I had to talk about my background and growing up in a dysfunctional family. It was important to describe what it was like to go manic and be forcibly hospitalized. I needed to show the tools and strategies I employed in my recovery.

It was also important to be humorous. As tough as it can be, it's important to be able to laugh at yourself. I learned this



Playwright and actor Elly Litvak

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while taking a stand-up comedy course at Langara College with David Granirer, who continues to teach stand-up to people living with mental illness through his program "Stand Up for Mental Health" (see sidebar on next page for details).

I wrote jokes about the psychiatric system, my family background and my diagnosis. I made notes about the critical events in my life and was quickly overwhelmed, not only by the amount of

material, but by the memories I was dredging up. Getting support is an important recovery technique, so I followed my own advice and asked my partner, Doug, for help. Doug had helped me with my comedy act, so I knew he was funny and could write, help me organize my thoughts and choose the best stories. As my partner, he could also help me work through the unpleasant memories. I think that sealed the deal for him.

I was once told by a therapist that when I feel down, I should do something that makes me laugh. While developing the play, I dealt with the emotional triggers by watching my favourite comedies and cartoons. This helped inspire the characters I needed to portray. Although I often felt emotionally drained once Doug and I had agreed on how we would creatively spin my stories, I also felt invigorating pride and satisfaction at my ability to be objective, be creative and laugh at my past.

My life was full of interesting characters to help tell my story, people like psychiatrists, new-age healers and convicted criminals. One of the first characters we developed was a narrator known as The File. The idea came from copies of my psychiatric records.

My writing process involved creating a draft of something I thought was really funny or poignant, then showing it to Doug, who would say something like, "Great, but it doesn't really fit." I'd respond with a mini-meltdown. Then we'd take apart the story, put it back together and make it fit. The script went through two public readings and three rewrites before we were ready to stage it.

The complexity of the 12 characters was challenging. For a couple of months, I'd shut myself in the bedroom for a couple of hours every day until I'd memorized the script. Doug was now my director. The transition from script to performance was

tedious, repetitive and frustrating. In all, it took a year to write and produce *Now Who's Crazy Now?*

The premiere was for a community organization where I knew the staff and clients. I knew they would be a supportive audience. That performance was profoundly transformative. It was as if the story was no longer only mine; it now belonged to the world. That moved me forward in my healing journey.

I was compelled to provide an opportunity for others to tell their stories, which led me to establish a series of workshops called "Now Who's Talking? Telling Your Recovery Story." Spark of Brilliance, founded by Judith Rosenberg and based in Guelph, Ont., was the perfect organization to launch it. It's a grassroots initiative that promotes recovery and discovery through the arts to people living with mental health issues, their families, friends and mental health professionals.

I've performed *Now Who's Crazy Now?* dozens of times across Canada and the United States. Each show is different, and I still work hard at improving it. I've also added a question-and-answer period at the end. It's a great opportunity to provide more information about my recovery and hear audience members' recovery stories.



Elly Litvak in costume for her one-woman play *Now Who's Crazy Now?*

I'm always filled with satisfaction when I reach an appreciative and inspired audience. When I started writing the play, I felt that I was mostly through the recovery process. Not so. Writing and performing the show has taught me that recovery never ends. Like my recovery, my play will always be a work in progress. That is what excites me the most.

Elly Litvak is a mental health coach, consultant and public speaker. For more information about Elly, her one-woman show Now Who's Crazy Now? or the "Now Who's Talking? Telling Your Recovery Story" workshop series, please visit www.whoscrazynow.com.

LEARN MORE

Spark of Brilliance (www.sparkofbrilliance.org) is a community-based mental health initiative that promotes healing through the arts. Visit the website to learn about its workshops for people experiencing mental health issues, their families and friends.

Stand Up for Mental Health (www.standupformentalhealth.com), led by counsellor and stand-up comic David Granirer, teaches stand-up comedy to people with mental illness to build confidence and fight stigma and discrimination.

The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity is a ground-breaking book by Julia Cameron that will inspire you and help get your creative juices flowing.

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, by Anne Lamott, is a funny, helpful guide to getting your thoughts on paper.