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# The Living Stage

## THE THERAPEUTIC THEATER

*The “theatre for spontaneity” was the unchaining of illusion. But this illusion, acted out by the people who have lived through it in reality, is the unchaining of life. . . . This mad passion, this unfolding of life in the domain of illusion, does not work like a renewal of suffering, rather it confirms the rule: every true second time is the liberation from the first. One gains towards his own life, towards all one has done and does, the point of view of the creator—the experience of the true freedom, the freedom from his own nature. . . . Every living figure denies and resolves itself through psychodrama. . . . One speaks, eats, drinks, procreates, sleeps, is awake, writes, fights, quarrels, earns, loses, even dies a second time in psychodramatic ways. But the same pain does not affect the player and spectator as pain, the same want does not affect him as want, the same thought does not affect him as thought. It is painless, consciousless, thoughtless, deathless. . . . It is the self-produced and self-created recurrence of itself.*

—J. L. Moreno  
*Psychodrama*, Volume 1

**P**sychedrama uses action and role play as a means to study behavior in its concrete form. The therapeutic stage allows for the natural condensations and expansions of time that exist in both the conscious and unconscious mind to emerge into the therapeutic moment. On the living stage our worlds can be

produced in a manner that more closely imitates the way in which they are stored in our surplus reality. Psychodrama accesses that part of us that, though invisible, provides the script from which we live—our psychological and emotional world, with all of its uniquely personal meaning, logic and significance. The world that drives and defines us.

In psychodrama we “unchain the illusion.” The usual instruction in psychodrama is “show me, don’t tell me.” Psychodrama as a method of action uses the body *in situ* to warm up to the contents of the mind and heart. It differs from talking methods not so much in its theoretical approach but in its use of action or role play, in addition to words, to tell a story. Indeed, many therapeutic approaches—psychoanalysis, object relations, trauma and grief theory, self psychology, and some cognitive/behavioral approaches, to name a few—fit tongue-and-groove as a theoretical base for the flexible, action method of psychodrama. Psychodrama’s genius is its recognition that in order to find the right words we have to find the right feeling, and in order to find the right feeling we may need to gently reenter in body as well as mind, the time and space in which that feeling was germinated.

Psychodrama might also be seen as “the royal road” to right-brain functioning. The right brain plays a central role in organizing the psychobiological processes that underlie a number of vital functions that occur beneath levels of awareness. The control of vital functions that support survival and enable the organism to cope with stressors (Wittling and Schweiger 1993), the storage of early attachment experiences and internal working models that encode strategies of affect regulation and guide the individual in his interaction with others (Schore 1994), the processing of socioemotional information that is meaningful to the individual (Schore 1998), the ability to empathize with the emotional states of other human beings (Voeller 1986, Schore 1996) . . . the cerebral representation of one’s own past and the activation of autobiographical memory (Fink et al., 1996), the establishment of a ‘personally relevant universe’ (Van Lancker 1991), and the capacity to self-reflect and ‘mentally travel through time’ (Wheeler et al., 1997). These basic coping mechanisms reflect the right mind’s essential role in primary process cognition and affective and motivational phenomena. It is undoubtedly true that adaptive internal and external functioning involves the activation of

both left and right brain processes. Freud felt that centrality of unconscious processes in everyday pointed to the fact that the right brain is 'dominant' in humans, and that the most fundamental problems of human existence cannot be understood without addressing this primordial realm" (Schoore 2004).

One recognizes in the previous paragraph the qualities that are part of psychodrama, along with why it is a method that integrates right and left brain functioning. Simply put, it accesses right brain functioning and the left brain makes conscious sense out of the material that emerges. Through role play, one can recreate one's "personally relevant universe," tap into "early attachment experiences and internal working models that encode strategies of affect regulation and guide the individual in his actions toward others" and concretize "socioemotional information that is meaningful to the individual" and train people to "empathize with the emotional states of other human beings" and expand the client's ability to "self-reflect" and "mentally travel through time."

### THE FULLY ARTICULATED SELF

Recent studies reveal that our neural patterning is set up through myriad tiny interactions. The child, in conjunction with his or her primary caretakers, lays down a psychological and emotional template that gets built on throughout his or her life. This seems to be a phenomenon that continues to occur throughout life but is especially pronounced in childhood when the child's brain and body are in a rapid state of development. Each tiny interaction between child and caretaker affects the child's neural wiring, which is also part of the limbic system. Nature and nurture are exquisitely intertwined within the development of the growing child. And this seemingly personal imprint is, in part at least, relational. Accordingly, our limbic system is the part of our body/brain that has primary jurisdiction over our emotional selves. Altering deep emotional patterns is slow and painstaking work. Limbic bonds imprint themselves onto our emotional systems. The limbic system "sets the mind's emotional tone, filters external events through internal states (creates emotional coloring), tags events as internally important, stores highly charged emotional memories, modulates motivation, controls appetite and sleep cycles, promotes bonding and directly processes the sense of smell and modulates libido" (Amen 1998). Childhood

imprints lay down a foundation for how we process our emotions that we work from throughout our lives. Our neural networks are not easily altered, for “early emotional experiences knit long-lasting patterns into the very fabric of the brain’s neural networks, changing that matrix calls for a different kind of medicine all together” (Lewis 2002). Our emotional life is therefore physical; it imprints itself on our bodies and it is changed through therapeutic and relational experiences. (I’ll discuss this further in our chapter on group psychotherapy).

We learn through all of our senses, and the quality of our sensory integration affects our ability to process life’s experiences in a coherent, emotionally intelligent manner. The more senses that are involved in learning, the more the brain records and remembers. In the case of trauma, the more senses involved at the moment the trauma occurred, the greater the risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. For example, the first responder at Ground Zero on September 11, 2001, is more likely to develop PTSD symptoms than the person who watched the events unfold on television because more senses were involved (Golden 2002).

Traumatic experiences from childhood, within the home, involve many senses and are powerfully recorded on the brain/body. They also occur at the hands of caretakers who, in relation to children, have the power in the relationship. A pain-filled relationship where there is a power imbalance coupled with reduced access to support from the outside world can set up a traumatic bond. These are the sorts of bonds that tend to recreate themselves throughout life if they remain unexamined. Psychodrama allows for a reversal of that power imbalance by placing the protagonist at the center of her own experience, in charge of the material to be explored. She operates as a sort of coproducer in her own drama and engages in the psychodramatic moment with all of her senses. This allows her to put the pieces of her world together in a more efficient manner, as many of those pieces are not only encapsulated in word but also in body, action and senses.

Clients who have been traumatized, who have spent too much time on high alert in a fight/flight mode, have likely experienced some deregulation of their limbic system, which governs moods. For example, they may be physically tight and tense, depressive, anxious, moody, or impulsive. Psychodrama, sociometry

and group psychotherapy allow clients to slowly create new neural imprints, to repattern their limbic system. Traumatized people may view everyday life in black and white terms. They may cycle back and forth between intense feeling states that overwhelm them and a sort of emotional and psychological numbness. As a result, their inner world comes to mirror this pattern, and it gets projected onto their experience of life. Therapy provides a slow remodulation and, over time, can allow them to reenter their bodies and their lives. Their hyperactivity can slowly calm down and eventually reach a less volatile level.

Psychodrama allows for a level of sensory, intellectual, emotional and behavioral integration that is the foundation of its unusual therapeutic efficacy and healing power. It incorporates all of the senses along with language, concrete behavior and affect. It provides for an integration of both left and right brain.

### ROLES PEOPLE PLAY

The role, according to J. L. Moreno, "is the tangible form the self takes," the concrete expression of the living, breathing inner world. By studying the role, we have a way of studying the self, and by working with the role, we have a way of working with the self. Man, according to Moreno, is fundamentally a role-player. "The function of the role is to enter the unconscious from the social world and bring shape and order into it." Through working with the roles that a person plays in his or her life, both on the healing stage of psychodrama and in the client's actual life, we have a way to enter a person at a fundamental level and reshape the unconscious. This is, in part, why working through roles goes so deep, because it enters the unconscious and accesses the thinking, feeling and behavior that have developed alongside the role since its beginnings. Psychodrama concretizes, explores, reviews and revises the person *in vivo*, in all his complexity and power. It strengthens and empowers the self.

One of psychodrama's fundamental tasks, according to Zerka Moreno "is to put the client in touch with their own internal healer." She describes that "we all must touch the autonomous healing center of our clients no matter which particular approach we use" (Blatner 1987). As part of the psychodramatic method the protagonist is encouraged to make and remake life choices and expand his or her role repertoire by adding new roles, either within the self or in relation to

other people, while reducing others. This can facilitate the learning and mastery of new coping skills (role training) and provide a corrective, socially supportive network or a reworking of object relations through surrogates (role repair). All people have a variety of roles that they constantly play. The process of repairing some roles, adding new ones and allowing others to move from the foreground to the background is part of how psychodrama uses role-play to heal. Protagonists can learn self-directed problem-solving skills using their own and their auxiliaries' resources to help solve issues and experience the self-esteem related to task completion. We are all people living within a context, and all of our problems cannot be adequately addressed by looking only at the inner person. We need a method that looks at the social atom of a person, or a concrete representation of the nucleus of the client's relational world. Through sociometry we address the *interpersonal* aspect of healing as we work to bring a client's social atom into balance and harmony (social atom repair).

### SPONTANEITY AND CREATIVITY

Moreno felt that man was fundamentally a creator, that our lives suffer when we lose our ability to be creative, spontaneous and in the moment. When we are ruled by fixed images, or *cultural conserves* rather than the experience of living in the here and now, we lose access to our personal sense of empowerment. Moreno believed, as do certain Eastern philosophies, in the sacredness of the present moment. "The greatest challenge in life is to be present, in the here and now, and to act" (Hale 1981). The science of action, both psychodrama and sociometry, "is concerned with the preparation for action (warm-up), barriers to action (resistance), inability to be in the moment and therapeutic methods designed to assist the creative process in life." The task of action is to explore those life events and situations in which a person has learned attitudes and behaviors preventing spontaneity and creativity.

Spontaneity and creativity are twin principles of psychodrama. Psychodrama places the protagonist at the center of his own drama. This empowers him to both show and tell his own story, to restore his position as the creator. In embracing the concepts of spontaneity and creativity, and in understanding and stepping into the role of "the creator," Moreno's concepts

become important cornerstone ideas on which to build a life and a world.

We are steeped in the scientific, which is one of our great strengths as a society and helps fuel our curiosity and enhance and inform our relationship with life, the world and ourselves. But we need to be more than objective witnesses in life. We need to engage in the spontaneous process of living. We cannot “Google” our way into self-knowledge; we need a method that will allow us to work from the inside out and the outside in. As we reach, through role exploration, into deeper layers of self, we expand into a new universe—the universe of self. And we find, to our surprise, that it is in connecting with the self that we connect with others, and in connecting with both we delve into our spiritual natures and recognize the pulse of life vibrating within and around us. We see what’s already there with new and deepened vision.

Psychodrama believes that “joy, creativity and laughter are vital to the human experience and as such are to be part of psychotherapy” (Siroka and Gershoni 2004).

### THE WARMING-UP PROCESS

Moreno felt that what was learned in action must also be unlearned in action, that in action we can do, undo and redo, thus freeing ourselves from blocks and barriers that keep us from being present in the here and now, that block our spontaneity.

Each of us has a warm-up to the various activities of our day, a warm-up to going to work or school, to doing written work, to returning home, to going out with friends and so on. The warm-up is what moves us toward action. Some warm-ups can lead toward positive, nourishing action, while other warm-ups might get us in trouble or cause us to go down a less-than-helpful road. “The science of action begins with the crucial concern of the warming-up process. This phase begins in the here and now and involves externalizing the encounter one has with him/herself, and the unspoken dialogue one has with another.” (Hale 1986)

The body, too, has a warm-up. How many times I have listened to clients talk about being in a difficult moment, perhaps at work or home with a spouse or child, when their bodies became flooded with stress hormones, their hands



began to sweat, their hearts pound, and soon they were in the middle of intense actions, explosions or withdrawals that seemed to come out of nowhere. But they don't come out of nowhere. Through role-play, we can get in back of the moment, so to speak, and examine the situations that set up the complex to begin with through action. Once we concretize those beginnings on stage, once we go to the *status nascendi*, or the situation from which the conflict took root and grew, we can reflect on behavior in its concrete form. From this we can extract meaning and insight.