

DIRECTORS ASK PROTAGONISTS

Exasperated mothers ask their toddlers, "Why did you do that?" They answer back "Because..." She waits for him to continue, while he waits for her to fill in the blanks. Question and answer become rhetorical, convey no information, offer little help. Help for what? Mothers express frustration, and children offer nothing to rebut.

Effective queries should persist and range broadly. Not so much for toddlers, but in what directors ask of protagonists. When directors encounter toddler-like resistance from protagonists, perhaps a beginning director's has started with the fruitless question "Why?" The one who doesn't know 'why' makes something up on demand, just to please and/or close down further questioning.

What's Wrong with Why?

Directors get better mileage out of 'how?' than 'why?' Even when the protagonist gives an answer he's long told himself, the danger is that "why" may be mislead, taking us on a detour, or be premature, precluding self-discovery, while confirming the director in the role of an expert who fixes things, rather than the cultivator who fosters protagonist growth.

Let directors beware the specious answer to 'why,' for 'why' heralds the descent into logic. If indeed we succeed in showing the reply didn't make sense, we risk enhancing the protagonist's feeling of futility, for who wants to seem 'stupid?' This is not how to build self-worth, often precarious enough for most protagonists.

The proffered answer to 'why' may be out of context, and oblivious to the claims of body, identity, family, social and cultural situations---none of which we can acknowledge succinctly. Besides, though this may be contrary to usual experience, when a protagonist comes up with replies worthy of another therapist, is this an echo of something read in a self-help book, unassimilated on the emotional level. What do we do for an encore, when we have the smug answer before us?

Educated people have an annoying bias in favor of abstract solutions. Especially when they're on target we may find ourselves in the rarefied atmosphere of fascinating philosophical discussion, and forget to get down to earth where concrete action offers the more likely arena for attacking the presenting problem. This is a huge pitfall where director and protagonist have superior IQs and both know it.

Alternatives to 'Why?'

One alternative is to calmly, gently ask as if one hasn't already decided on the expected reply. Rather than say "What **were** you thinking?" as we so often do in individual therapy, we prefer instead, in a sensitive tone to ask in the midst of a psychodrama scene, "What **are** you thinking?" Note the present tense (even though it refers to moments ago), for the habit of speaking in the historic past sacrifices immediacy. We announce decisions in the present and carry them out in the future. Too many dwell in a past gone and done, which insulates them against facing their unfinished business.

We may avoid the morass the premature "why" invites, if we accumulate more data to use later in the session. Scene setting makes "who, what, when, where and how" more appropriate. The protagonist relaxes. "This is easy," he feels. Little does he realize that his answers stand out in bold relief from the previous questions directors have questioned, such that the inevitable variations given gain significance.

Consider the volume of responding. Giving terse one word replies come from persons worlds apart from those who go on and on in picturesque language audiences love. The latter show more ego strength and are better candidates for psychotherapy. Of course some directors are not quite so receptive to the voluble. Such press for the bottom line, not just at work, but at home when viewing movies or reading mysteries. How sad that the unreceptive miss so much life offers. Five year olds have eyes wide open. They've not yet learned to live in small worlds. The sensory aware artistically inclined make excellent scene setters. They enjoy differences, rather than see them as inconvenient distractions.

The Director Role

Let's suppose you're a beginning director. All is not lost if the director has become as frustrated as mother above, and the protagonist, as much on the defensive as the toddler. At least the emotional level rises and the relationship between director and protagonist surfaces. The belatedly self-aware director sees the transference potential and grasps a clue on how the protagonist grew up. "Is he relating to me as if I were a parent-figure, child-figure, sibling-figure, love-figure, power-figure...? Beginners beware, don't rush in with an interpretation. Hold what you suspect for what comes later. If your hunch is incorrect you haven't lost anything, you've not alienated your protagonist. But if your guess is correct, you've gained considerable territory, informing both strategy and tactics ahead, and reducing your own performance anxiety, now that you know where you're headed. Be wary of the put-down potential of director, double or auxiliary correct analyses. Instead, funnel the evidence, so that it's the protagonist's discovery. He needs the glory. You don't. Besides he'll remember the essentials longer.

Climate Control

For one thing you validate the protagonist's fledgling explanations as indications he is in earnest and is making progress toward his ultimate goal. "The way will become clearer as we move along" is a safe comment. This fosters protagonist investment in his therapy. He tumbles to the fact he must sweat blood to get where he wants to go. The therapist is hardly breathing hard. He's empathetic, rooting for you all the way, and completely confident you can do it after all. Experienced directors know the 'problem' belongs to the protagonist, who, properly coached, may solve it--without your parading your director expertise.

Some protagonists arrive blaming everyone but themselves. Perhaps their view of therapy is 'role training,' and they look to you to teach them how to deal with difficult others. Make them aware that they "expect too little," for even if you were to do as they wish, they would still have their problem, and "you protagonists will have to return for dose after dose till you discover that, as the comic strip Pogo discovered, "we have met the enemy and he is us." "Difficult others aren't here for treatment. We must treat you, not them!"

A Footnote on Faith

The self-consciously religious, whose prayers have not been answered as they suppose they should've been. are driven to the conclusion that catastrophes in their lives are the "will of God." Passive postures don't work. Time, like a flood, rolls over us. Maybe they suffer a bad conscience over having to consult a therapist. If they come to like the therapist, they may presume God will be working through the director. In retrospect it can look like that, and persons of faith are entitled to the interpretation.

So long as human beings have free will, there will be 'evil choices'---or even good ones which run at cross purposes with those of others. We are not in this world alone, nor can we bypass unpredictable nature, all of which can and does run counter to this or that individual's interest, regardless of the extent of one's piety.

In my opinion that doesn't make the Deity an absentee landlord. Rather the divine impact upon us comes through the courage, intensity, and resourcefulness of our response to the situations confronting us. Let protagonist faith be an asset, not a liability. But beware presuming that a benevolent Spiritual Presence brings suffering upon us to teach us a lesson. Better to regard what the Deity disapproves of too as a mutual problem---indeed a challenge to our growing in spiritual relationships.

Story VS Plot

Here are a few one word questions which provide a much better springboard than "why?" viz: **Who, what, how, when, where, to what extent?** Such are vital to scene setting, without which little happens in theater, literature or psychodrama. The sequence of scenes constitutes a story, the raw material for a plot, the basis for anyone's understanding of what it all means.

.Please don't prejudge me as being unnecessarily 'picky.' For years I used "story" and "plot" interchangeably as I suppose most people do. I now regard 'story' as the broader term, which normally includes plot as an essential ingredient. It would be a dull tale without a plot. Besides, this is what turns out to be faulty, leads to protagonist dysfunction, and provides the focus for our treatment. Therefore, I do not minimize plot when I stress 'story-strictly-speaking-apart-from-plot.'

The answer to 'why' is not fully or finally determined by the story itself.. The story teller, the interested listener, the curiosity seeker, the hapless victim are the locus of various overlapping plots--producing quite different stories, while nearly everyone assumes everyone else is witness to the very same story---his!

Story incidents may be either positive or negative within the same parameters. Structurally (not chronologically) the story is there first. It assumes a vast array of meanings, depending on the protagonist's 'why.'

The protagonist is living out one plot, the director is constructing another. The psychodrama process is itself a story presented to the group, and the interacting director and protagonist navigate multiple plots. When psychodrama is making therapeutic progress, all these overlapping plots converge and merge into a more integrated whole, producing a story that makes consensually validated sense, rendering the protagonist more able to cope with the world beyond the theater.

Story Spine

This is in the spirit of a disclaimer. In making the distinction between the 'story proper' on the one hand and the 'plot' on the other, I may have given the impression I'm out to downgrade plot. Not at all. It's for the director's thinking as he seeks to disentangle what's amiss in the protagonist's life apart from the realities confronting him, and also to give him more leverage in seeking an alternative. So that you may believe me, I shall now show how essential plot is to what has gone amiss in the protagonist's life.

Leigh E. Johnson, esq gives us this template for organizing our grasp of the accused's story, and of witnesses stories, in preparing for presentation to the jury in the courtroom. That it has a much broader application becomes immediately obvious. It brings out essentials in bold relief.

Once upon a time.... Fill in the name, and perhaps the most relevant characteristic including his place of origin. [I'd include temperament. The Greek sanguine, will do].

And every day.... What is his routine? Where and with whom does he hang out?

Until one day.... This is the critical incident, perhaps what brought him to the law's attention.

And because of that.... The situation has gone out of control. Others seek to control me. Note how we've come to an answer to the question "Why?" an interpretation which is 'plot.'

And because of that.... Any philosopher will tell you that 'cause' is not really out there as a thing to be discovered. It is always an inference to explain how one incident follows another. We understand the incident in terms which answer the question "why?"

And because of that.... As many of these as required to bring us to the point where flight is no longer is possible. We've hit all the high points.

Until one day.... This is the day of the crime, becoming a defining moment in his life.

And ever since then.... This bring us up to date. He waits his turn to go to trial while the defense team represents the best answer to 'why' that the evidence will support, and show that the contrary story offered by the prosecution doesn't fit nearly so well.

One may follow this sequence with witnesses in the case quite as well as the accused. The continuing focus is on why our client came to this precarious position. The spine is not pretty. We don't follow point by point the above pattern, Scene and sequence put flesh on those bare bones.

Indeed, it also provides an outline for novels or screen plays, accidents, catastrophe's....etc.

Who?

Consider the question 'Who?' Ideally this is one the group has selected as representing their current focus, a situation those present can identify with. (See Dale Buchanan's classic article) No two persons are exactly the same. Even those with related gene foundations never face exactly the same environment, for everyone stands in a variable relationship with everyone else, and nature seems to impact at random. Of course there are social and cultural realities but anyone's particular take on these differs to a greater or lesser degree from any other. The psychodrama director welcomes, appreciates, and respects whatever the protagonist presents, knowing full well had he'd not have seen things just as the protagonist has, if he'd been there in his place.

"Who" also calls for a cast of characters. We get the protagonist view on who they are for him, and for others. The 'who' which refers to the protagonist has been largely established before the action began. In a continuing group protagonists are usually well known at the outset, even before the warm up. First comers often get selected by the group, for the newcomer may arrive ready-to-go, and sometimes the group prefers to wait to see who this is before they're comfortable being protagonist again with the hitherto unknown quantity in the group.

But even for the newcomer, who-this-is comes to be a given by the time action gets underway. There he stands before us. Nonverbal cues abound. "Is he tall or short? Fat or thin? Young or old? Hairy or hairless? Neat or careless? Restless or relaxed? Loud or quiet? See his hands, his face, his feet. Listen to what he attends to in others, his reaction filtered through his every day persona, which includes group affiliations, and his compelling concern. We've yet to grasp the interpersonal situation from which he's come, and the intrapsychic layer beneath it.

Group Identity

Ask a class to write down their answers to the question, "Who are you?" within a few minutes and collect the papers, promising to return and discuss the answers next session. About half the replies say who I am not, and then cite group affiliations for who I am, and end with descriptive adjectives and familiar psychological terms. The emphasis on one's group identity must not be ignored in this age of individualism.

Our groups have become sophisticated enough to see beyond social stereotypes, although the subtitles of unfamiliar cultures may mislead them. These may be corrected as we move along. Persons who habitually work with many cultures are so well aware of the possibilities, they develop a style they presume to be intercultural.

But what about the people in the group, who may not be so blessed? A minority person present with a majority identity director may arrive on guard because years of reinforcement lead them to expect, once again, evidence of disrespect.

The new do not automatically know how open the director is for them. He has to prove it, with no wisp of the sledgehammer approach. Otherwise he comes across as patronizing. For example, I grew up where there were was no such minority exemplified in anyone I knew, and made the mistake of mentioning it in passing. I thought I was being supportive of their feeling that their belongingness may be an issue, but my good intentions backfired. They read 'nonacceptance' into my comment of 'acceptance.' I never saw them again.

Significant Others

Barely touched on in the warmup is "who" of significance constitutes in the protagonist's world, the absentee cast of characters of the drama, past and present. And also the past within the present. The social atom refers to the few who were there with us at the beginning of our lives and provide the template for all who come after. Especially as vacancies occur we're prone to find replacements among those available. To achieve 'fit' we bend reality a bit in accord with our needs. I do not necessarily refer to those the newcomer protagonist knew previously, whether in person or by reputation. We should have already attended to that in the warm-up. Otherwise the director may stumble into a multiple protagonist situation complicating the direction underway.

If you're going to have more than one protagonist, you require setting up an oral 'contract' indicating how much you think you can do within the time-frame allotted. The only excuse for bypassing this initial step to the action is that you didn't know any better at the time. You may have to back pedal. You have the task of selecting doubles and auxiliaries, subject to much modification en route.

Some directors even expect the protagonist to make the selection of director, as we are prone to do in training situations. Henceforth the convener of the group graduates to 'supervisor.' Be very careful of this as the unconscious may betray the protagonist, who selects the least experienced candidate in the group, whom he may hoodwink at will. You retain veto power. Be vigilant of suspected borderline personality protagonists., They bear watching. Don't do it with first timers. You don't know them that well. Otherwise trainee selection of director is OK in a mature group.

Spade Work

With a beginning group the director must introduce role-taking. Teaching auxiliaries is relatively straightforward. This can begin during the warm-up in having an 'old timer' and a first timer role reverse in the process of getting acquainted. Done the traditional way is easy. Once the group grasps the mechanics and we're into the action of the drama, we may go through cast selection in having the protagonist take the role reversed position of the other in his specific scene. Then the director interviews the protagonist playing the role of the other. I've discussed this elsewhere, so a single caveat may suffice. Avoid psychological terms. At this point we want to know what the 'other' looks like physically, something of what he says or does, not his presumed motivation for doing so. No armature analyses. Beware of using psychological jargon---only what may pass in good theater. And sparingly there too.

Selecting a good double is an awesome task if we have no experienced doubles at hand. If some of the group are professional therapists, that's where I'd look first, but I'd only chose someone I knew had no need to impress us with his expertise, and be willing to hold his suspicions in abeyance. I coach out in front of everybody. No whispering or writing on cards. Secret communication is generally unwelcome in psychodrama, especially during the action on stage.

Therefore I tell professional therapists, accentuate the feelings, minimize the ideas. Often I stand beside the new double, and throw in a terse phrase or two, so that he gets what I mean. Our aim is to provide the protagonist with someone who so closely identifies with him that he functions almost as coming from within the protagonist himself. The double's words are for the protagonist only. We do not react to the double's performance---only to what the protagonist validates. Without protagonist reaction, it didn't happen. Of course the double explores whether he missed the mark. He may double the opposite. Maybe he didn't go far enough. Maybe he went too far. Like the marksman who shoots high, then low, and finally somewhere in between, he varies his aim till it's clear he's on target as the protagonist responds more freely to the double's being there with him.

Traditionally when the protagonist role reverses the double stands aside and remains silent while the protagonist is in the role reversed position. Early in psychodrama history directors who had the double trot along doubling confused everyone. Don't do it. Wait till he returns to his own role.

Early in the history of a group I may not use a double at all but do it myself from the director's role. When challenged I say I'm waiting to see if the protagonist needs one. There are a few who don't. I also have an eye on the group to see nonverbal evidences of identification with the protagonist. When I find a likely prospect, I back off from doubling as the director and bring the new double to the stage. At other times I underscore someone's words by repeating them aloud. I aim this at the protagonist, but the whole group is listening. These may be next door to interpretations, but they're not literally so. I may even try a series of doubles. Occasionally more than one double at the same time concretizes salient aspects of the protagonist, as when we find polar opposites within the protagonist, one double may double from one pole and a second from the opposite pole. I have even had them grasp his arms as if to pull him apart. Be careful lest those doubles overdo it. I want just enough tug to stimulate emotion, not so much as to cause pain.