

From 28 Plots to 24 Stories

I've come to recognize the crucial difference between story and plot. Given that, I now understand the resistance to my original 28 plot system. Even though I tried to make my usage clear, common prejudice against scripting among psychodramatists prevented their looking any further. An array of specific patterns seemed unspontaneous, creating a tendency for the director to pigeon-hole a protagonist presentation into this category or that.

I had developed the categories, not for the protagonist, but for the guidance of the director---as well as for training and research. My use of the word 'plot' invited misperception. The 28 plots were intended as specific examples, not as recommendations for a director to follow. Therefore I've fallen back on the less structured word 'story' to represent my meaning. The director must personalize the 24 story system in order to own it, or let it go entirely.

I shall not insist on even that much. The psychodrama samples which follow grew out of my practice prior to the introduction of my plot and story systems. This allows you to make your own test, for the illustrative psychodramas have not been selected to persuade anyone of anything---not even the view I've finally embraced. Supervisors who don't want to be bothered with innovation may simply advise their interns to ignore the final chapter of this book, for all that precedes exemplifies classical psychodrama as the Morenos' have taught me and I have practiced for a lifetime.

Here I speak to new directors, with a view to getting you into action with sufficient ease for you to develop competence and confidence. You are ready to move beyond sheer imitation as role-takers into the full adult world of role-players. When you've found acceptance as truly representing our profession, you may in your maturity graduate to role-creating, and serve as the cutting edge of those who will, at that late date, constitute the future.

You cannot fail, so long as your spontaneity prevails. Keep the faith, practice the art, and sooner or later the world will beat a path to your door, and our humble beginning will be well on the way forward transforming humankind. May Moreno's vision--and mine, be yours too.

You would not be reading this book, if you hadn't had the good fortune of experiencing psychodrama sessions, where you've seen at first hand what great potential is there. But don't be so awed that you underestimate what you yourself can do. Your life experience, in retrospect, you may regard as "having conspired to bring you to this moment." Don't let an unhealthy modesty defeat you before you've hardly started. You may not ever clone yourself to reproduce those who've inspired you. So much the better. Otherwise the world would miss the unique contribution which you alone can make.

Early in my career I participated in an intimate psychodrama retreat, where the quality of psychodrama direction was at a peak. We became a cohesive group. Our leader told us the night before our departure that we'd have a relevant dream to provide us with a suitable conclusion. He was right. One after another we each shared the dream we'd received. Finally we came to a prominent educator, who was on psychodrama ground for the first time.

The scene he set was a Western mesa, which condensed into the form of an altar. On its surface he saw an intricate gadget, its myriad parts all open to view. The director placed his copy of "Who Shall Survive?" on the table to stand for the invention. One at a time each person in the group approached the offering, and the protagonist saw it responded to each in a personal way. One with flashing colored lights, another with a soothing hum. The accumulating effect showed richness one wouldn't imagine could come from such a strange machine. But the protagonist himself stopped short of taking his turn. He awakened from his dream sobbing.

The dream done, our group in one accord brought the underoled apparatus to him, our spokesman saying, "you helped make it work for us, and therefore you should own it. You have shown its glow for you in your reaction to each member of our group. It's yours. No one else can possess it as you have. Your spontenity has blessed us."

Professionals are familiar with Freud's dream analysis, whereby he distinguishes between the manifest dream and the latent dream. The manifest dream is the dream as it has been remembered, consisting of fleeting episodes. The latent dream is the unconscious meaning, according to Freud. The distinction has been with us at least since the Biblical story of Joseph, where he took the Pharaoh's manifest dream and interpreted it as predictive of the future.

We have been too much in a hurry to attach our meaning to the protagonist's presentation. Like the manifest dream, it involves a sequence, which answers the necessary context questions of what? When? Where? Who?, and How? but we do well to hold back till all the information is in, before taking on the question of 'WHY?'

To boldly ask that question too soon puts the protagonist into his head, glossing over his feelings to prejudice the outcome. Now the protagonist may have already converted his story into a plot. He sees causal connections from one episode to the next. We admit an overarching theme may dictate the selection of episodes, but themes do not normally specify causal explanations. Rather the universal truth of what happens under certain conditions.

The problem is that the protagonist's plot usually serves defensive purposes. He sees others, individually and collectively, bad luck, bad health, or the devil, as his obstacles, but fails to address the obstacle within himself. Our goal is to get him to take responsibility for his own decision making and behavior. On the other hand, some others have not accepted their own limitations and swallow more responsibility than is realistically possible. This is where the group provide a more realistic perspective.

We prod the protagonist to go beyond the blame game and to accept the situation as one's own problem and opportunity. The world may have changed while he stood still, or he may have retreated into his own fantasy world. Inasmuch as this is not shared by his environment, his relationships suffer. Others won't let him control them. They don't let him in.

Or if they do, the healthy part of themselves protests, leading to conflict and periodic separations till someone grows up. Learning to respect personal boundaries and situational parameters is essential, but this can be done only when I accept and know who I am. Identity opens the door to intimacy. Full maturation requires this. Otherwise we experience chaotic feelings, work under a handicap, which impairs our ability to relate with others and deters our finding our proper place in the common world.

The psychodrama director has reached this level, and as a spontaneous human being, develops spontaneity in others. By definition this implies creating new solutions for old problems, or accessing old solutions for new problems to give the protagonist's story as satisfying an ending as may be realistically possible. This includes re-inventing a plot to serve as a guide for the foreseeable future.

Why read the last chapter of this book? What good is the 24 story system? Giving heed to the protagonist's affect presentation, the director finds himself within the ballpark of only a few sample stories. This suggests which questions may lead somewhere, as he rules out this and that, and having come upon the more likely fit, he **absolutely does not 'shoehorn'** the protagonist into it. Rather he finds it a handy guide to sorting out similarities and differences from among the closer patterns, that the protagonist's identity may stand out in bold relief.

As the director mirrors back to the protagonist his perception, and the protagonist sees himself, together they can review options which the situation requires, and the protagonist makes a choice. Director and protagonist explore the viability of the chosen option, and as a conclusion anticipate the successful resolution to the protagonist's predicament, worth trying out the individual's plot in life beyond stage, group, and theater

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