

Discussion: We leave the specifics of the psychodrama process to make a few generalizations. I have sought to bring out the source of the nuclear scene and the ineffective, self-defeating effort to recover it. Affects amplify experience, increasing its urgency. Whereas positive affects produce *variants*, negative affects invite a converging process, forming *anlogs*, which magnify the impact of trauma. But with psychodrama intervention, Jane discovered she need not pursue the same old unsatisfying life style. She could salvage as much of her past as she wanted for a better future, for what that will consist of is no foregone conclusion. Jane has a lot going for her, including relationships capable of redefinition and expansion. She no longer gropes in the dark. Now she knows what to look for, how to ask for help, and get it. If her marriage ends, it will be without rancor. If not, it won't be the same old marriage. Marriage wasn't the problem anyway. The nuclear script was the basic problem. Marriage or no marriage, this is what must go, and having let it go, she will be open to whatever comes next. In terms of my 28 plot system, a DESCEND plot has been deflected toward a LIBERATE plot.

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The PSYCHODRAMA of a NUCLEAR SCENE

Modifying
the Self-Destructive
Destiny
of the
Tragic Hero

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IN MEMORY OF
MY PARENTS,

Herbert Charles Miller, 1889-1938
Elsabeth Donnelly Miller, 1893-1938

AND OUR CHILDREN,

Paul Herbert Miller, 1969-1970
Jonathan David Miller, 1956-1974
William Walter Miller, 1954-1992

A COMPOSITE PSYCHODRAMA

Superimposed on Rae Carlson's JANE W.*
Exemplifying Tomkin's Nuclear Scene Concept**

The setting is a weekend workshop for graduate students about to begin their clinical internship. Most have been recruited from an evening program for mature adults. Where so many matters of personal relevance arise, confidentiality must be maintained. Accordingly, we shall use the name *Jane*, without necessarily implying that what follows has been entirely faithful to Rae Carlson's case. We've rounded out the picture with close parallels from the experiences of those present.

The nine **participants** have attended a psychodrama demonstration earlier in the year. Those who've already met, however, know little of a personal nature about each other. To get underway as quickly as possible we have challenged everyone to move forward in time to the conclusion of the workshop, and (to speak as the workshop leader) *share in a general way what you didn't bring up, but wish you had, for obviously those willing to risk have profited immensely from the experience, and are in a far better position to begin their internship.*

Jane is the last to take her turn. She introduced herself as a divorcing, 45 year old mother of two, who came into the program three years ago, pursuing her studies while she has been employed as a full time English teacher at another institution. She looks sad, and speaks with the reluctance of one about to humiliate herself.

JANE: I didn't expect to open this can of worms, but I can't afford to be less frank than everyone else here has been, so here goes. I filed for divorce well over a year ago, and my husband didn't put up much of a fight. He's already signed the papers, and now the ball is in my court, but all that 'legalese' has been sitting on my desk a couple of weeks already and I haven't been able to bring myself to sign my name.

D (=Director): Now you're having second thoughts.

JANE: I thought you'd say that, but the truth is I haven't changed my mind. I want out of the marriage. Not that he's a bad husband. He'll have a lot less trouble finding someone else than I will. I'm kind of a private person. I have trouble with closeness. I feel smothered. He'll be better off without me.

D: May we meet him? *(She nods)*. Come on up front, sit in this chair, and pretend that you are him. How do you do, sir. *(shaking hands)*. What is your name?

From the manner of her presentation we gather Jim is ten years older than she is, a highly successful engineer, not psychologically-minded, and deeply hurt that she has rejected him. He is much too proud to hang around where he's not wanted. The kids are in high school and welcome to go see him any time they want to. He's taken an apartment only a few blocks away.

D: Well, at least you won't have to go through all that fighting.

JIM: We don't fight.

JANE: *(out of role, as herself now)* That's what he'd say.

D: Choose someone from the group to be Jim. *(She does, and the director invites her to take another chair, set at a 90 degree angle from the seat just vacated, while an older male peer comes forward to play Jim)*.

JANE: Jim, once something has passed, you're ready to sweep it under the rug and forget it. Life's not that simple. We had some pretty big arguments.

JIM: Refresh my memory.

D: Instead of your telling him about it, let's see it. It will be our first scene. Where are we, and when is this?

Scene 1: Maybe 3 AM, January 1, after a private New Year's Eve party sponsored by a mixed group of Jim's colleagues. Jim and Jane had gone in separate cars, for Jim was coming in from an out of town meeting and wasn't sure just when he'd arrive. He didn't want her waiting around wondering when he was going to get there. Jane has come into the bedroom, found that Jim is not there, and is in the process of undressing when Jim appears in a bathrobe at the door. *(When the auxiliary can't guess what to say we role reverse)*.

JIM: I thought I heard you come in. I'm spending the night in the guest room. I had no idea when or if you'd be back, and I didn't want to be awakened when you decided to come home.

JANE: When did you leave? Why didn't you tell me you wanted to go? I was terribly embarrassed when the hostess told me you'd gone. It was bad enough going there by myself. Much worse to have to leave alone. I wasn't sure I could find my way after dark. It was scary with all those drunks on the road. What if I made a wrong turn?

JIM: How can you be so helpless? Who at the school would ever believe it? But they don't know you like I do.

JANE: You know I never drove a car till we got married. You tried to teach me, but that didn't work.

JIM: Your father tried teaching you too, and I didn't do any better than he did. You had to pay an agency to teach you. What a waste of money.

JANE: It was money well spent, and **my** money. Why did you leave without me?

JIM: You sat at the host's feet half the evening. His wife was annoyed with you. When any decent looking female comes on to him like that, he's like a kid at a candy store.

JANE: I can't believe you're jealous.

JIM: Not jealous. Embarrassed. I know you but they don't. You can be sure he was getting ideas. He make a pass at you?

JANE: He had too much to drink. He could afford to. He didn't have to drive anywhere. He was already at home. And it wasn't a pass, just a friendly hug. I'll admit it made me feel uncomfortable, but I know he didn't mean anything by it.

JIM: I'm glad I didn't wait around. You can bet his wife will be all over him when he sobers up, if she can wait that long.. Jane, this is not the first time we've been through this. I've seen how your student assistant looks at you.

JANE: He's just a kid, and that guy tonight was old enough to be my father. If anyone gets out of line, I call it to a halt.

JIM: I believe you, and that's not the point.

JANE: What is the point?

JIM: The point is that you flirt around. It's OK, I'm used to it. But whenever someone responds, you're surprised. You're not half as surprised, confused and angry as he is when you cut him off like that. Don't you know your place?

JANE *(angrily)*: I don't have to listen to this. Go to bed and let me get some sleep. *(She turns her back, and he exits)*.

D: Cut scene.

Interscene Dialogue Between D and Jane:

To the protagonist: This isn't why you filed for divorce, is it?

JANE: Not really. Merely the last straw. I agree that was not a serious fight.

D: Hardly a fight at all, as you've presented it.

JANE: We're not the melodramatic kind. He has no idea how much he hurts me. I know he doesn't intend to. He makes allowances for his friends, particularly his male friends, but he cuts me no slack at all. I wanted them to like me. I felt on the outside looking in. They're his friends. Some of them have known him a lot longer than I have.

D: Isn't the situation reversed with regard to your colleagues at school? They've known you a lot longer than he has, and he must've felt awkward, on the outside looking in then, just like you.

JANE: In the first place, I don't have any social relationship with teachers at the college. It's all business, or politics at the teacher's association, nothing personal. I'm not good at the personal. I was hoping to ride in on Jim's coattails, but he's so dense he never gave me the chance. And then he slaps me down.

D: The way he did in the scene we've just seen. Have you always been shy?

JANE: Thank you for noticing. No one else does. I go through hell when I have to stand up for myself. Everyone thinks I do it so well. They have no idea what's going on inside me. I keep thinking that some day I'll be found out, and everyone will know what a phony I am.

D turns to the group: How many people here think Jane is a phony? (Several shake their heads. No one raises a hand).

JANE: What did you expect them to say?

D back to the group: Who here has never felt like a phony?

(Spontaneous laughter. One man said, I feel like it's only a matter of time till they find me out, and I feel that way most of all right after I've done something well. (Jane is amazed).

D to the protagonist: You're obviously very bright, and I'm sure you've always done OK as a student, and as a teacher. But what about ordinary everyday stuff? Sports, playtime, that sort of thing?

JANE: I tried very hard to learn to swim, but I never did as well as the others. I feel awkward on the dance floor. At last I was so embarrassed I went to Arthur Murray's. I was their worst student. I have no rhythm, and I can't make my feet do what I want them to do. Let's not do any scenes on those, please!

D: Of course not. Let's get to know you as a child instead. Be four years old. (Jane laughs, says OK). Hi, little girl, what's your name?

Scene Two: The Little Girl Inside

JANIE: I'm Janie. My mommy says I'm not supposed to talk to strangers, but you're not a stranger. You're like daddy.

D: You really like your daddy, don't you? Why the frown?

JANE (out of role): I flashed on something that happened back then. I don't know why that stupid memory has stayed with me.

D: Let's not worry about 'why.' Get back into role as 'Janie' and show us what happens. Where are we?

JANIE: I'm in my room, playing with my doll house.

D: Who else are we going to need for this scene?

(We select auxiliaries from the group to play Mommy and Daddy, and as above provide information they can't guess with role reversals).

Mommy screams, there's a thud, and Janie runs out into the hallway to see what's wrong. There's a pull-down stairway to the attic. Mommy has tried to go up with a load of boxes, lost her footing and fallen to the floor in the midst of the boxes. She's in shock. Janie runs to the other end of the house and brings Daddy.

DADDY: O my gosh! Are you hurt? Can you move? She tries to sit up. Here, let me help you to the couch. The scene moves to the living room. He touches the end of the couch, saying Honey, sit here. Janie, who has gotten there before them, promptly plops down in the space indicated.

To little Janie, gruffly: Get out of there! It's your mother's place. She's the one who has been hurt.

Janie is stunned. Speechless, she backs to the wall. The tears come. D sends in a double for Janie:

DOUBLE: Don't yell at me. I'm your 'honey' too -- or I was till now. Now I don't know where I stand.

D, underscoring and elaborating: I don't know where I stand. Where do I belong? Is there a place for me?

JANE: I was so ashamed! That's all I remember.

D: We'll cut this scene, and move into an imaginary scene. You never did discuss this incident with your parents, did you? And they never mentioned it again, right? *Jane nods.*

Scene Three: Surplus Reality

D: So let's do it now. I want you to speak up like your double did, and let Daddy know how you feel. We'll say that he got your mother a blanket, and now she's speaking freely about what happened to her

At last your father sees you off by yourself, with your back to the wall. Reverse roles with him. Be the way you wish Daddy had been.

Daddy: Why are you standing way over there?

Mommy: I'm OK, just a little bruised. I scared us, didn't I?

Daddy walks over to her, picks her up in his arms (we didn't fully do this part, just said what she'd like), gave her a kiss. You're my little honey. Mommy is my big honey. I'm sorry I yelled at you for making that mistake. I was so worried about her I forgot about you. I don't know what I'd do if I ever lost you.

JANIE: You never talked to me like that. I didn't know what I'd done to make you so mad at me. Now I know.

Mommy, I'm sorry I was so selfish. You needed the couch. I thought Daddy was talking to me. I was so stupid!

DADDY (all three are seated on the couch, with Janie in the middle. This time the auxiliary plays the role of Daddy): You are not stupid, and you are not selfish. You came and got me. That was the right thing to do, the best thing you could've done for Mommy. Daddys aren't perfect. We have a hard time concentrating on more than one thing at a time. You two are the most important people in the world to me. I want you at my side too. *He puts an arm around her, and kisses her on the cheek.* I love you. *Tears again, Mommy holds her hand.*

D: Cut scene. Clear the stage.

Dialogue between D and Jane:

D: Be adult Jane again. Let's talk. Now we know where you're coming from. Something very good had turned very bad. The natural thing would be to try to regain what was lost. What makes that hard is your original impression you were No. 1 for your father. To get things back to where they were, he'd have to put Mom in second place, and how can he do that? In the meantime, you automatically review the traumatic scene, and think of other incidents which show the same pattern, increasing your pain and your desperation to restore the balance which was lost. Your inability to do the impossible makes the past look even greater than it was at the time. You're not little anymore. How can you, how could anyone ever hope to compensate for that?

JANE: I can't believe so much would come from so little, but I know what just happened. It explains a lot. But it doesn't seem right that what's happened since hasn't made more of a difference.

D: You're up against the habits of a lifetime. What you perceived as your father's betrayal sealed off your innocent paradise to place it beyond a more mature appraisal.

JANE: Like that part of me never grew up. I gravitate toward safe father figures and luxuriate in their attention. What's bad is that everyone puts a sleazy interpretation on it, and time and time again I make more enemies. What have I done?

D: You've become more resourceful and ingenious, compensating this way and that to protect yourself, while you sacrifice the near at hand for the sake of gold at the end of the rainbow. The good news is you now know what's going on, and you can experiment with more productive strategies.

JANE: I'd like that. Where do we begin?

D: Show us the place where you live, from which you'll build your future.

Scene Four: Adult Options for a Better Future

JANE: Here I am at my desk. We'll imagine the desk. There's plenty of work to do, but how can I get to any of it with these divorce papers staring up at me? Why can't I sign them and get it over with?

D: Be the papers sitting in this chair. Your double can play you, sitting across from the papers. Papers, what do you say to Jane?

PAPERS: What's the big deal. Just put your name on the dotted line at the bottom of the page, slip me into the envelope provided and drop me in the mail.

DOUBLE: I don't want to end it. Why can't things just stay the way they are? If I sign, matters will only get worse. My kids already blame me. They can't see that their Dad has done anything wrong.

JANE (out of role): My son asked, "Mom, when are you going to grow up? Can't you forgive and forget?"

D: Reverse back to yourself. Your double can stand behind you, and the papers once again become just papers. Choose someone to be your son.

We learn that Joe is 16, an outstanding junior in high school, and more than a little disgusted with the way things have gone in the family. From where he stands, the problem is Mom.

JANE to her SON: You're right. I am the problem. It's not your father. He deserves better than me.

SON: He's never said that. He's not shown any interest in anyone else. I asked if he wanted forewarning that I was coming over. He gave me a key. I said I was afraid I might walk in on something. He said there was no danger of that.

JANE: I've come to a point in my life where the old ways no longer work. I haven't anything to give him anymore. He doesn't turn me on. The magic isn't there. The relationship has grown cold. I'm sorry.

SON: I know sis and I haven't lost Dad, but we're afraid we're losing you. We can't understand why you're so sad. You've got a great job, your colleagues respect you, the students love you. You've gone back to school, and you've done well. You always brag on sis and me. You've got a lot to be thankful for. Why isn't it good enough? Does Dad have to be perfect? Mom, what are you looking for? If you could have anyone you wanted, who would that be?

JANE: No one. He doesn't exist. The papers don't matter. I'm not looking for anyone anymore. Your father will be free to do whatever he wants, and not have to worry about me. Moving out was his idea. He could've stayed in the guest room. He still can, whether I sign the divorce papers or not. It's up to us.

SON: If you sign, you know he won't be back. That's why you haven't signed.

JANE: It's not fair to put you through this.

SON: Why not? I'm in it up to my neck anyway. Remember when the prom came up, I said I wasn't going to go. Two girls dropped some heavy hints. I knew I wouldn't be turned down. Do you know why I didn't go? Not that I was too lazy to make the effort or too scared to make a choice. I imagined myself with each one, one at a time, of course, and somehow it didn't seem to be enough.

JANE: You too! Don't repeat my mistakes.

SON: What do you mean?

JANE: Sally and Sue are no competition for the girl of your dreams. You sat home prom night while the world passed you by.

SON: Dumb thing to do, wasn't it? But it didn't seem so important at the time. As I think back on it now, I feel empty.

JANE: That's how I've been feeling -- till tonight. I think I see a light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe I can help others avoid making the mistakes with their lives I've made with mine.

SON: Can you do that? Haven't you got to help yourself first?

JANE: That's exactly what I've been doing. I've decided that now is not the time to make a major move in my life. Those papers can gather dust on my desk. You can tell your Dad that I don't intend to sign them for the foreseeable future, but I will sign them if he asks me to. I hope he won't. I want to get better acquainted with me. I can make responsible decisions only when I know who I am.

SON: I didn't realize I was holding my breath.

JANE: Nice to breathe again, isn't it? Can I give you a hug?

SON: Is this my mother speaking? Do I get to hug back? Well, just this once. We don't have a lot of mushy stuff in our family. Dad will never believe this.

JANE: He can come see for himself. I'll give him a call.

D: Cut scene. Let's go to sharing.