

## **For Beginners, mechanics of role reversal and doubling**

There are a wide variety of styles in psychodrama, as in all the arts. Don't expect the experts to be carbon copies of each other. We're not, and glad of it. Otherwise creativity would be dead. Unless we want to confuse everybody, however, we must be consistent with ourselves over the long haul. Then we are free to bend in this or that situation, as the occasion demands. When our adopted procedure has been thoroughly learned, such that we need to focus on technique no longer, all our concentration goes to the protagonist before us, and our action will fit. Someone asked, "Must a gentleman know French?" The apt reply: "A gentleman must have forgotten French."

So with this caveat against preoccupation with techniques, we go to a step-by-step demonstration.

1. Place a chair center stage. For this exercise you will add another chair in a moment. For the sake of complete audience viewing we often visualize two chairs at a 90 degree angle from each other. When the second chair arrives you can rearrange them if necessary. Have other unoccupied straight back chairs off stage but handy. Choose protag.

2. Let the protagonist imagine someone (anyone) important to him/her in the chair. For this exercise the protag chooses someone not in the room, but don't say this till someone does it. It is not required that the one chosen be living at the present time. Again, if there is any question the director reassures the Protag this is OK, but he doesn't suggest the possibility unless someone asks. Some have even made a supernatural, historical celebrity or science fiction choice. Don't dare suggest it, but ask "If you're serious and this is important to you," it's OK." (Otherwise don't waste our time! is my unspoken attitude)

Director: "Protag, take the **auxiliary chair (non-professionals may say "empty chair")** and be the person you imagined there. Show us the posture of the (significant) other. Be the other there. (The chair comes to stand for the other)." "What is your name?" "What do you (use the name given) look like sitting there?" "Describe yourself." (Forbid psychological jargon. Say "That may come later. Now we want a physical description.) "Do you know (Protag's name)? "Who is (he/she) to you? You answer with how the other sees you. Does this fit you?"

3. So the director brings another chair onto the stage at an opposite angle from the protagonist. (Sometimes the director must rotate the chairs so that no player blocks the audience view of another player). The director says: "Protag, I brought this chair up here for you, where you can move over to be yourself." (Protag does). "Now you make this your own chair. This particular chair represents you."

4. "Choose someone here to sit in the chair you just left. Sitting in that chair the person you chose represents the other person you've just presented to us. While you were in that chair as the 'other' you showed us how the other person views you. While in the audience the other person was taking it all in, so that the auxiliary arrives on stage with a perception already forming, and will act on it subject to your corrections. The auxiliary sits in the auxiliary chair, as much his as yours is to you.

5. "The auxiliary is always playing a role, including the moments he takes your chair to play you". He is very careful about how he does this. **When the director calls reverse roles, that means the two players on stage move to the opposing chairs.** (It is considered gauche for the director to say out loud, "switch" or "trade places" even though the meaning seems clear, for "reverse" denotes a technical word, cleansed of fuzzy lay connotations.

"Remember that the protag did not have a chair of his own, but spoke from the auxiliary chair even before you chose the auxiliary to occupy the auxiliary chair. On your exiting what is now called "the auxiliary chair" to take yours the auxiliary often echoes the last line you said, just before the director called for the role reversal. If the protag objects to what he hears, the director reverses him back to correct the auxiliary. Then sends him back to his own chair. The auxiliary

dutifully incorporates the changes, as much as possible using the very words of the protagonist.

We may repeat this till the protag is satisfied. The protag readily discovers when he's being too picky. Or the director may say, "I believe the auxiliary has the sense of it. Let's move on."

On occasion the 'too helpful' auxiliary may throw in an interpretation. We prefer to make interpretations in actions rather than words. What an analyst would call an interpretation doesn't belong here. Once in a while the director may throw in an interpretation to break a log jam, but he does this very sparingly. He doesn't need to prove to anyone how bright he is.

6. Footnote on the protag's choice of the other: Nearly always this is the Protag's choice. But suppose he picks a person who would be an ideal self figure the director had in mind as the Protag's double. (This must be handled sensitively). **"Good choice, Protag, but I had the same person in mind as one who should, if need be, play you. Who else can you imagine doing it?"** (Of course, the group must be large enough to allow such a range of choices).

7. When this is done as a training exercise, several trios will be spread around the room doing the very same thing, each carrying his own small chair. (The supervising director is not one of the three, but moves around the room to the various threesomes as needed). This simplifies matters. For one must be the auxiliary in the initial chair, and the remaining person, by default, will be the protagonist's double.

The training exercise works best when all three have chosen each other. Therefore the advance warm up brings out the sociometric stars. Without saying this is his basis (though it's not hard to figure out) the director makes the selection, sending each to one of the four corners of the room, for example, or to the two walls. Note that this precludes stars from choosing each other.

8. Suppose the director feels he has too little to go on. He invites **the people who usually volunteer** to come to the stage. "You know who you are." If there are too many he narrows down the number. If too few he says, "I need one or two more to come to the stage,

Then, as mentioned above, he sends the 'chosen' each to definite places in the room. There won't be room for them all on stage. If the room is too small he may have to make do with one or two threesomes while the others watch.

The director asks one person from the audience to join each star. (If there are four such, use the four corners of the room First come, first served basis). What we have left are those not so quick in making choices. They may need reassurance. We provide it. Each pair on mutual consultation, leaves their own space to invite a remaining one to join them. This approximates the best we can do to have together people who can work together. It's an example of action sociometry.

Summarizing: How do we get the 'stars' in the first place? The director, who has been eyeing the group closely may make the selection. Actually it doesn't matter, for if the director hasn't judged correctly, the above process will correct itself. Every pair together on stage will easily arrive at a decision on how to complete their trio, for the one person of the two, automatically takes the lead anyway. Among themselves the three will play all three roles in the series sequence that suits them.

### The Double

**9.. (Still within the training exercise), the third person becomes the double. Then after a few interchanges the subgroup rotates, clockwise or counterclockwise, as they wish.**

Ideally, before the training exercise, the group will have participated in a director led psychodrama. After processing that psychodrama, with the illustrated material firmly in mind, the training director stages the steps above, while the group has this paper in hand. The director uses three volunteers and gives them the roles to improvise, as he comments on what he's doing, especially with regard to the role of the double. Now refer back to step 6 above and follow through with the exercise. Sharing and discussion follow.

The antecedent for doubling in the psychodrama method is in the mother/child relationship. I speak of 'mother' in the sense of the 'mothering figure' (regardless of the biological facts). Indeed, here mother may be a man or an older sibling. If you don't remember, or haven't observed, note what happens as the involved adult relates empathically with the infant. The baby's every emotional expression constitutes a clue to what's going on. This is a cue for the mother to mirror back to the infant what the infant has been showing, her whole demeanor implying full acceptance. At the same time providing the necessary language. We welcome the baby into our world which becomes his world too. Winnicott calls this "good enough mothering," a minimum which holds a culture together. Conditions are not always ideal. That's where our doubles come in to give the adult what the child may have missed. As our protagonists absorb it all, they are more likely to behave differently, and on leaving the theater fit into the culture at hand and get what will satisfy them.

**Rules of thumb for the double:** 1. Take a position next to the protagonist which will allow you to fully mirror his posture and nonverbal behavior. A chair alongside works well. Be sure you can see the protag's face, which is the clearest expression of affect, usually preceding any words he says. 2. The fewer words the double uses the greater impact the words he does use will have. Occasionally the double may echo the exact word, but if he does it is to underscore their importance, and the affect shown along with it may slightly exaggerate what the protagonist has already shown. The double bears a resemblance to a Rogerian therapist, without the words, "You feel." and he doesn't talk quite so much. Nor does he throw in an 'obvious' interpretation like an analyst, except in a covert form "I wonder if I've been here before." But better should this come from the mouth of the director. 3. When the director calls for a role reversal, **the double does not, DOES NOT, role reverse with him but stands silently aside waiting for the protag's return to his own chair.** On the other hand, with the auxiliary in the protagonist's role he has the opportunity to temporarily function like a double. This is what underlies the "Satten shift" where only the double is allowed to represent the protag while he interacts with the other as himself. This is too much for beginners, or for some directors. I never use the Satten shift myself with beginning audiences, which is why I won't attempt to describe it here. In the original article the Satten's took 5 pages.

4. When the double 'gets it wrong' it's up to the protag to correct him, and then for the double to incorporate what he's heard in the very next doubling he does. If the protag's face shows the double hasn't quite got it right, the double may say, "Let me try that again. Is that right." The protag is the final authority on how he feels, No argument, unless it takes the form of 'you said this but you did that. Which is really you?' But only if the double has a great relationship with the protag.

5. Sometimes a protag gets overwhelmed and leaves the stage, or says "I can't go on." The sensitive director doesn't insist, but says "How about letting your double continue for you while you sit in the audience, free to interrupt if he misses the boat." Or the director may suggest that we can eliminate words and continue nonverbally. Or on the other hand, the director may ask, "Where does it hurt? or What's closing you down?" and let the protag talk. When he senses the crises has passed, he may ask, "Shall we try that in action? The fundamental rule is "the protag always has veto power. But that does not mean that the director lets the protag run away. More than once in a residential treatment setting protags have run off stage out of the theater. I leave someone in charge with the group and pursue the protag myself. As we walk and talk I'm able to cool the scared or angry protag down, and get his/her consent to return to the theater, or ideally to the stage. We conclude the action portion of the psychodrama if we can. If we can't we go directly to sharing. I commit myself to staying with the protag a while afterward. Psychodrama is not psychoanalysis, where patients are selected for their ability to pull themselves back together when the session ends. In that sense, our clients are unselected, what we might find "out there."

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