

STORY VS PLOT
A Footnote on Faith

The self-consciously religious, whose prayers have not been answered as they suppose they should have been. are driven to the conclusion that the catastrophe's in their lives are the "will of God." Passive postures don't work. Time, like a flood, rolls over us. Maybe they 'enjoy' a bad conscience over having to consult a therapist. If they 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 often runs counter to this or that individual, regardless of one's deep 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 situation confronting us. Let protagonist faith be an asset, not a liability. But beware presuming that a benevolent spiritual presence wills our suffering to teach us a lesson. Better to regard what the Deity disapproves too, as a mutual problem, and 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?" 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 most people do. I now regard 'story' as the broader term, which normally includes plot as a special ingredient. It would be a dull tale without a plot. Besides, this is what turns out to be faulty, leads to protagonist dysfunctioning, and provides the focus for our treatment. I do not minimize plot when I stress 'story-strictly-speaking-apart from plot.' Here's the point. 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 the plot---and not always the same.

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 interaction between director and protagonist navigates multiple plots. When psychodrama is making therapeutic progress, all of this 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.

Consider the question 'Who?' Ideally this is one the group has selected as representing their current focus, a situation those present can identify with. 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's impact seems to be randomly selective. 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 with the newcomer, who this is comes to be a given by the time action gets underway. There he stands before us. Nonverbal cues abound. We experience his everyday 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. Groups become sophisticated enough to see beyond social stereotypes, although the subtleties of unfamiliar cultures may mislead them. These may be corrected as we move along.

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. I do not refer to those the newcoming protagonist already 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 to complicate the direction he was taking. If you're going to have more than one protagonist, you require setting a '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 backpedal.

You have the task of selecting doubles and auxiliaries, subject to much modification as you move along. Some directors expect the protagonist to select his director. (During processing we explore the rationale). Then 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 blindside. Thus the trainer retains veto power. Be vigilant of suspected borderline personality protagonists., The bear watching. Don't do it with first timers either. You're not sure of what you're getting. Otherwise trainee selection of director is OK in a mature group. 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 as the director interviews the protagonist playing the role of the other.

I've discussed this elsewhere, so one important caveat will suffice. Avoid psychological terms. At this point we want to know what the 'other' looks like, something of what he says or does, not his presumed motivation for doing so. No amateur analyses. Beware of using psychological jargon---only what may pass in good theater. Selecting a good double is an awesome task if we have not 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 willing to hold in abeyance