

The Psychodrama Mirror from an Interpersonal Perspective

Have psychodramatists a monopoly on mirroring? Of course not. Assertions of prior claim invite acrimonious disputes, for psychotherapists using other methods also maintain a working commitment to the process of mirroring. In our enthusiasm for doubling and role reversal we may be tempted to argue that we mirror better, but comparisons of that kind are not a concern of this paper.

Rather than address the broad field of mirroring, we shall explore the effect of psychodrama's interpersonal orientation on the mirror technique. If our illustrations and comments happen to interest the clinician, well and good, but they are intended as a basis for clarifying theory. For example, what is the difference whether we focus on a protagonist's inner life or on his or her interpersonal network? One's answer bears directly on when, how much, and in what way the director uses the mirror.

For the mirror is more than an auxiliary action presentation to a passive protagonist. Context counts. The appropriateness of the mirror tactic depends on the strategy of which it is a part, which in turn is reflected in the combined impact of the group's benevolent presence, its willingness to risk, its creative presentation to the protagonist, the protagonist's responses in action, and the group's participation with the protagonist in exploring on-stage connections with one's off-stage life.

Beware. Aggressive confrontations outside strong supportive relationships, more than merely countertherapeutic, show a distressing resemblance to rape. To let protagonists sink or swim constitutes abandonment. / director's failing to acknowledge a share of responsibility for the fate of the protagonist suggests sociopathic indifference. Let us use the mirror well, or use it not at all

Two psychodramas exemplifying the mirror follow, the first plain and simple, the second much more complex and detailed. After a careful processing of the second psychodrama, we shall discuss theoretical implications, and conclude with recommendations.

Protagonist in Colorado

As a student-in-training in the mid-1960's, I enrolled at a workshop in Evergreen, for I'd heard that my mentors, Doctor and Zerka Moreno, would be there. As a long resident of a plains state, the awesome spectacle of Ponderosa pine, spiring upward toward snow-capped peaks, grasped and held me captive for ordinary human contact. Once indoors, the sell receded, but its aura remained as I gazed through an icing picture widow to the fluffy, fluttering, dancing flakes, curtaining out the very light of day. With an effort I tore myself away and turned to the group within, where I noted the singular personalities I'd come to be with, smiled to them my greeting, and they nodded in response.

The several succeeding sessions, except for a blind walk through the snow, blur in memory; but, as the workshop neared its close, I somehow emerged as protagonist with a presenting problem I can no longer imagine. The high point of the psychodrama for me came by way of the mirror. Silently with mouth and eyes wide open I watched one person after another re-enact futile attempts to make contact with me. Surely they had underestimated the impact of their beautiful wintry environment on this plainsman, for their long acquaintance may have habituated them to its fascination for a newcomer. No matter. With surgical accuracy they cut to the heart of the situation, laying bare my preoccupation with the Morenos at the expense of relating with the group. How humiliating! Shrinking in the sight of those I would like to have impressed, I willed to vanish and be heard of no more.

But the director's wisdom was manifest already in providing me with a supportive double, and in swiftly following the final mirror scene with the warmth of unconditional acceptance. So I took the place the group was offering me and was restored to myself, with as deep an integrative catharsis as I'd ever experienced.

Directing at Beacon

In contrast, I directed a Saturday night open session for the Moreno Institute at Beacon, New York, in the late summer of the late 1970's. Open sessions do not carry quite so compelling an obligation of confidentiality as do regular closed sessions. Open session protagonists are not considered patients, inasmuch as the prime function of demonstration psychodramas is educational. This allows a more nearly literal presentation here than would have been possible otherwise. J.L. Moreno advocated complete frankness, even to the point of using the actual names of protagonists, with their consent, of course. Likewise, we have a movie of the psychodrama which Doctor Moreno did in Paris, where no one was anonymous. Nevertheless, I shall protect the privacy of participants in deleting identifying data, and ask other readers who assume they know of whom we speak to likewise maintain a courteous silence. Please do not construe any comment below as criticism of the protagonist. We know there are no bad protagonists, only bad directors!

Therefore this is not offered, as it stands, as a model for young directors. I had not yet completed my training, and I am not particularly proud of this example, for it was very ordinary production at best. Please be kind enough after you read the psychodrama below, to read it through processing also. The scenes are numbered for easy reference.

Background

The protagonist was a European youth, who had resided at the institute all summer for psychodrama training. Let us call him "Robert." For you to follow the director's process you should know something of our experience with Robert prior to the open session. I was present for three of Robert's psychodramas in the two weeks previous.

A letter from someone at his commune in Europe led to the first psychodrama. That person claimed Robert was selfishly out to do his own thing in the U.S.A. He'd "deserted" them, when controversy over the proper attitude to take toward one member's involvement with an "outsider" was threatening to tear the "family" apart. (In my 28 plot system, this is plot 12, "Abandoned," and its remedy may be conceived in terms of plot 26, "Associate.")

The second psychodrama had to do with father's continuing guilt-provoking domination, and Robert's inability to break free. (An emancipation scenario, plot 1 in my system, which remained incomplete).

The third psychodrama grew out of his dissatisfaction with the second. He had a headache. There was "something he couldn't get out." He was alone and stuck. People stared at him. Like a hamster in a cage, all his running within the wheel got him nowhere. Another image: it was as if he were encased in a glass ball, where no one could get a grip on him or hurt him, but where he could hurt everyone else. I don't think either of these images were concretized.

He was speaking of the vomit inside him, when suddenly he referred to mother, "who had never wanted me from the very beginning." In being born he had intruded on her relationship with her husband (not his father?) and had taken away all her freedom.

Therefore he needed to be reborn, "right this time," so the student director granted his wish. That done, Robert moved on to a future projection, a surplus reality scene in which his parents came to visit his apartment, accepting his autonomy, along with his furniture and his incense. See scene 6 below. Here's the open session.

Action Scenes

1. The problem presented had to do with Robert's agony over the train of students going back home, the force of which had thrust itself upon him at dinner the day before when he found himself in the midst of several "strangers" there for the weekend workshop. Briefly we enacted the dinner scene with the help of several people who'd been there. They recreated the noise and excitement of the occasion, while the protagonist remained silent.

I asked them to pantomime the very same scene, to give Robert the opportunity for a full soliloquy. He focused on the "intrusion" of newcomers, with an undercurrent of loss at the exodus of a few special people.

2. Even though Robert had assured us that he'd had no unfinished business with those who'd gone, some stood out, women who'd directed his sessions or played vital auxiliary roles, such as girl friend or mother. We did the farewell scene without a double, for he continued insisting he'd done all he wished to. The scene was painful to him but he was inclined to minimize it, and I thought it inadvisable to press the matter.

3. Almost as an afterthought, Robert remarked that it was the waxing and waning of his level of energy, like the rise and fall of a roller coaster (another metaphor to invite concretizing!) which left him drained. From an association to this, we moved back in time to a workshop which had taken place on the continent, where the revered leader dubbed Robert a "clinger," plunging him to the depths

followed by compliments afterwards, exalting him to the heights. I flashed on my weekend in Colorado, but held back, for I thought it too early in the psychodrama for the sort of climactic mirroring which had cleared the way for my healing.

4. Again the protagonist declared, "I want to do it for myself." Accordingly I set out to restore the lost sense of autonomy in calling for a surplus reality scene based on his experience at dinner the day before. He chose auxiliaries to replace the two who had gone, and asked more from the audience who were among those coming to dinner at the institute for the first time the day before. I challenged him to take the initiative in bringing the two subgroups together, helping them to get to know one another. I'd intended this to be a positive experience, and slipped in a double to assist him, so that he wouldn't feel completely alone.

5. It wasn't enough. He tumbled from high to low in only a few minutes. Therefore I produced an intrapsychic scene, representing the two sides of himself, as he'd mentioned earlier in the session. Center stage were two chairs facing each other. Robert took one of the chairs, saying that this was his 'low energy self,' and addressed the chair opposite as his 'high energy self.' After giving sufficient time to establish the character of the low energy self, I reversed him to the empty chair to play the high-energy self, while I brought in an auxiliary to play the low energy, 'low self' we'd just seen. The power initially manifest from the high energy chair was already running down, when I pulled the protagonist out of the part-self role to bring a second auxiliary from the audience into that place. We watched the mirror for several minutes, with the interaction between the auxiliaries presenting Robert's vacillating intrapsychic processes. I functioned as temporary double for Robert.

6. Keeping in mind my memory of the previous psychodrama (see above), immediately I cut the fifth scene and called for an auxiliary to play the role of his mother, for the one who had played the role so well before was among the special women who had gone. My objective was to represent the relationship with the mother-figure changed to include what had been attained in the previous psychodrama, to make up for what he had felt had been missing in his life. Which scene from the previous psychodrama we turned to I'm not sure at this point, but probably it was the future projection of the parents visiting his apartment, and of his mother giving him a hug at the end. I prolonged the hug as long as I could, to give him as much support as possible. Reminding Robert that the auxiliary here represented both the former auxiliary and mother simultaneously seemed to enhance his experience.

7. Unlike therapy sessions we do not have a fixed closing time at open demonstrations, but it was late and the audience was getting restless. I was loathe to end with the previous scene, despite its positive character. In the spirit of going full circle, I invited the new people who'd come to dinner the day before to join us on stage. At that same time visitors who hadn't actually been to dinner came to the stage, while some of those who should've come forward didn't. Indeed, a few were already slipping out the back door to go home. The situation was in danger of becoming confused. Quickly calling the mother-auxiliary back to Robert's side, I sent them from the stage out into the audience together "to choose someone new they'd like to become better acquainted with." The moment they made their choice, I invited the audience to come forward for the sharing.

Processing

Although we frequently allow general questions and discussion at the end of an open session, we take care to fully complete the sharing, and offer a brief break to underscore how different sharing is from what we do next. This serves to reduce the group size and make it easier for the director to control, as well as giving the protagonist an opportunity to leave if he so chooses. Residents at the institute rarely leave, for we count on their identification with the protagonist (and/or director) to help dilute and discount any inappropriate remarks from the public. If the group is small enough we may suggest going to the local ice cream parlor for a more relaxed and informal discussion. The real processing took place during the morning session the next day, at which time Robert was in a better position to join in as a regular member of the group.

Informed by Robert's three previous protagonist experiences, I already had the impression he'd been struggling for emancipation from his family of origin, while acting as if he'd attained it. The break with his parents had opened the door to his displacing unresolved conflict with them onto current relationships, such that ambivalence toward mother, for example, led to projecting all her "goodness" onto one person, and all her "badness" onto another person. This splitting rendered independent posture even more fragile. Robert felt driven to make it on his own, but he couldn't pull it off. Overdependence inclined him toward fusions, from which he had to fight free or risk losing himself totally. Leaving people behind, or their leaving him, and having to start over again with someone new kept Robert feeling helpless, sad and desperate. Growth required his gaining an attachment to someone over a long enough time for the opposing sides of his ambivalence to emerge with full intensity, and for him (and