

Please Forget That You Know What 'Role' Means . . .

THE PRAGMATICS OF HUMAN FUNCTIONING

DON REEKIE

ABSTRACT

Don Reekie focuses on the pragmatics of human functioning. He considers what makes sense and how we work. You are invited to recall, review and relearn. Set aside the baggage that the word 'role' is lumbered with in the 21st century. Examine your own everyday experiences. Look at human functioning while applying Jacob Moreno's concepts and methods, centred on theatre, stage, drama, production, storyline, actors and audience. These can guide us to make sense of our ordinary everyday functioning and assist us in producing psychodrama.

KEYWORDS

becoming, being, consciousness, creativity, functioning form, Moreno, play, psychodramatic production, role, spontaneity, stage, theatre, warm up

Let's Look At The Way We Are

I ask you to forget the meaning of 'role', so that you will be open to clearly recalling what you know about the way we are. My starting point is with seeing 'role' as the 'functioning forms' we have.¹ As we begin to consider this together we have to accept that words have common uses that are beyond our control, regardless of how important a particular word is to us.

Twenty five years ago younger adults with 'self actualisation' and 'full potential' in their sights could be put off 'role' because of their desire to be individuated and not

defined by society's expectations. Today 'role' is in common use, meaning a prescribed place and fit of a person in an organisational system. When was the last time we heard people speak of their 'job' or their 'job description' or their 'work'? The word 'role' has filled in and taken over. Indeed speakers frequently appear self-satisfied to use a word so superior to 'job', 'task' or 'purpose'.

Moreno took a word, restricted at the time to theatre and sociology, and expanded its scope and relevance to personality development, relationships and community. Today the word 'role' is restricted to 'prescriptions' and 'expectations' to be 'taken on'. 'Role' is popularised as concerning sets of behaviours to be followed. 'Role' is expected to be 'like second nature' – which clearly means 'role' is not seen as our first or true nature.

Psychodramatic methodologies are about the real me and the real you. Our tradition in the Australia and New Zealand Psychodrama Association (ANZPA) gives emphasis to particularities of role. I believe that in our best practice we consider each person in their uniqueness. We consider the functioning form a particular person has at a particular time, in a particular place and with particular people and objects. Functioning form combines a multitude of influences brought together from within and without this person.

We can create descriptors of a functioning form which have great communicative power. These may picture a person in action and bring their functioning to our awareness with vivacity. However, it is important to know that our first task is not to depict. First we must work to see the person, appreciate them and meet them. When I was young I knew a coal miner, a wise old man, who said "Don, you need to learn to listen with every pore in your body". I realise that I also need to see with every cell in my body. I meet and engage with the functioning form a particular person has. How do I take him or her into me and come to really appreciate who they are? I believe psychodrama has the goods. Moreno's methodologies offer to take us to the deep flows of heart and soul of each person's particularities.

Let us face the facts. We are matter and movement. We move to survive. Gregory Bateson (1972) wrote "We cannot not communicate". We move, and as a consequence of our movement we continuously communicate. Although we deliberately communicate through gesture, sound, verbal language and writing, Moreno recognised movement as our primary communication. Just as, we cannot not communicate, we cannot not be ourselves and we cannot not create ourselves.

Whatever else functioning form or role is, it is a phenomenon, the phenomena that we all are as responsive and purposeful beings in action. "Role is understood holistically as a person's specific way of being himself or herself in any given situation" (McVae & Reekie, 2007).

Theatre and Stage

Theatre imagery can be a medium for what goes on in daily life, and what goes on in daily life informs and becomes an art form in the theatre. My concern here is to set functioning form very firmly into a theatre setting. I believe it is only by placing

functioning form on the stages of both theatre and of ordinary life settings that we discover what role really is. The functioning forms each person assumes in the scenes of their life are who they are. When I think role, I think person, private and public. I think personality and culture. I think values and relationships. I think that the organisation of our human functioning is lit up by my seeing everyday scenes as if they are theatre, each on their own stage.

Let us not limit enactment to what happens in a theatre, nor restrict spontaneity to what takes place on a stage. Let us see life as drama, enactment as the happenings and spontaneity as our ability to be free to be ourselves. We can think of the chunk of space where life happens as stage. The processes of theatre production can provide us with constructs to describe what is happening in the scenes of life. On the other hand theatre aims to imitate, present and focus our attention on the lives we live.

Psychodrama gives opportunity to bring our lives to stage as theatre and laboratory. We can work to experience, to learn and to develop by applying Moreno's canon, universals and instruments. The Canon of Creativity posits the interactions between warm up, spontaneity, creativity and cultural conserve. The word 'canon', I think, indicates that this is the way things always happen with human beings. It cannot possibly be that Moreno had in his mind a council of wise authorities enacting edicts. The Four Universals recognise that we are set in time, space, reality and cosmos. The Five Instruments necessary to psychodrama are stage, patient, director, auxiliary-ego staff and audience. I do not usually follow Moreno's use of patient and staff. These arose naturally from his psychiatric hospital setting at Beacon where he did have patients and staff. These three sets of factors are powerful influences on the scenes of our lives and the living theatre of psychodrama. They guide us in production and in discerning the pragmatics of role. Thinking theatre, stage and drama assists us to reveal the dynamics of people interacting in their functioning forms.

In theatre a role is conceived, a script written, a cast developed and drama enacted in a specific context. Playwright, artistic director, stage manager, set designer, sound and lighting technicians, choreographer, composers, musicians and performers combine so that each role of the play has its place and its integrity. Without integrity the actor will ham or caricature the role he or she plays. In life, integrity is demonstrated when individuals in relationship are recognisably being themselves. They are each a seamless whole of many interweaving elements. The stage on which we act is the actual context, the set is just the way things are, and the choreography and scripting emerge as a reciprocating dance that evolves between all of the co-producers of the drama, who are being themselves just as they are.

As a child of eleven, my father sometimes took me to his work on the River Thames, where he was boson (boatswain) of wharves and lighter roads. Lighters were barges which carried cargo from large ships to the wharf. They were tied to buoys in the river while awaiting the boson to shift them into their proper order. Eventually they would be tugged or sculled to wharf-side for unloading. We would scull out in a dinghy to 'the roads', the queues of lighters parked in river centre. His task was to re-order the lighters to be taken the next day for unloading at the wharf. With a single 27 foot oar, he freed

and moved each fully-laden, giant, steel lighter and re-moored it into position. I stood by him as he guided them, aware that the river's hidden power was our only engine. The oar eased us into a tide flow, and then an eddy, to be checked by a surge, to carry forward on pressures generated from river-bed formations, and then turned us to glide into place. I was unbalanced by lurch or jerk of the lighter as we shifted flow to flow. With practiced eyes and spread feet, sensing familiar pulses and drives within the chunk of water beneath us, my father's whole body was at one with the river to magically bring each lighter to its proper place.

The chunk of space we think of as stage is multi-dimensional. It seethes with the influences of relational currents. An attuned producer senses the stage space, standing beside a protagonist, interviewing for role and responding to each influence within the scene. Every space has the three basic dimensions of height, width and depth. The stage space has a multitude of less obvious dimensions. Experienced producers become attuned to these. They include location in time, the process of time, the consciousness of past and future in the present, the emotional reactivity with past events and relationships, the anticipations of future whether hopeful or fearful, the actual realities of the specific environment, the social dynamics in the current context, and the apprehension of cosmos for the central actor and for those who are auxiliary egos in the drama. The scene is filled with influences and possibilities. The people, the actors, move in their various functioning forms within that chunk of space with its mixture of influences.

In the scenes of life or within a psychodrama the actors are creative geniuses, though their potential may be rudimentary or realised. Each person in any moment will have developed their functioning form to a certain degree of spontaneity. A basic level of spontaneity is seen when they take on a functioning form, a higher level of spontaneity shows in fluent play of functioning forms, and at a third level they may have ability to be creator of their own functioning and therefore of their self and their being. They might then be said to be 'on song' or 'in flow'. "When spontaneity is low, there will be a lack of role flexibility, while increased spontaneity activates a person's innate creativity and generates new, more effective roles" (McVae & Reekie, 2007).

How Do We Learn To Be Ourselves?

We learn to be and become who we are through action and enactment. Development of Morenian spontaneity is the development in us to be free, to select and to perform actions mindfully with immediacy, flexibility, adequacy, creativity, originality and vitality. Here I notice that psychodrama depends on play and playfulness. Life is not only spiced by play, but play is the central machinery by which we learn the functioning forms we have and are. When we are very young it is essential that we engage, interact with and demand of our caregivers. As toddlers we begin to interact with our environment and, in time, with our peers. The pace and quality of learning involved is huge. We imaginatively create and interact with our own special companions, entering realities beyond the observation of adults.

Sara Smilansky (1990), a childhood learning educator, viewed the play of children

between two and seven years of age as sociodramatic. On reflection, we recall that at that age children constantly organise games in which they play at life. Even alone they play at being the grownups. There is no doubting their absolute conviction that they really are doctor, parent, checkout operator or whoever they choose to be. Another aspect of their play is the discussion about the veracity of enactments and accuracy of portrayals. Learning through play is an effective process. It involves copying, purposefully being, gaining playful flow and shifting into creation mode.

Play is not just a childhood success story. With play adults develop freedom, control, and fluency. In an interview, relatively new Red Arrows aerobatic team pilots of the Royal Air Force spoke of their training, and the manoeuvres through which they learned and would perform. They said that they were encouraged to play. They were already highly skilled pilots. In learning to manoeuvre as a team they moved not to risk-taking but to play. They spoke of delight, edge, freedom to be in the immediacy of the moment and of an uncanny sense of the whole team in unison.

In psychodrama, we build on our recognition that play generates warm up to spontaneity. Play involves heightened absorption and delight in the experience. Focus and delight promote freedom and flow, which engenders persistent practice and sharpened precision. Play is crucial to spontaneity development and role development. Role training sessions are marked by play, spontaneity, creativity and delight. This is not to forget that for people of all ages play is very serious stuff. Just watch a child alone with an imaginary friend or listen to a sportsman or sportswoman speak of their aspirations. Let us recognise that practice in play is not just for future gain. Becoming is not separated from being. In play, immediate reality is pleasurable.

Getting To Know ME - And You: The 'Ins' and the 'Outs'

We come to know who we are as we oscillate between subjectivities and objectivities. We observe ourselves and others as life happens, and then as if from outside or on reflection. Here I build on recognition of subjective and objective separation and integration in psychodrama. Our functioning forms rely on our brains to utilise separate flows of consciousness, seamlessly organised in our every moment. Or maybe I should think flows of cognition, since some of the experience I write of is out of consciousness.

Sometimes, it becomes very clear that the Central Nervous System (CNS) organises itself so that we experience ourselves from a meta-position. During my mini-stroke, I was conscious of myself from outside of myself as well as being in myself. I did not see myself from the outside as people do in near death experiences. I had an observing consciousness of myself and of the effort I was putting into battling to control my cognitive and motor functions. There were two distinct streams of consciousness, one interested in the other.

American neuro-scientist Jill Bolte Taylor (2008) claims her severe stroke to be a brilliant research opportunity. She reports the extent of the separation of distinct CNS functions, including her monitoring of awareness. She presents from severe brain disorders and her own raw data. She says the right hemisphere focuses on right here and

right now, with picture and movement awareness. The left, she says, has linear linking with past and anticipates and hypothesises as to the future.

Julian Jaynes (1976) was a psychologist way ahead of his time in the 1960s and still controversial when he died in the 1990s. His views of CNS anticipated neuro-psychological research continue today. Amongst a host of innovative thinking, he envisaged a mind that functions as if there is an 'analog I' and a 'metaphor Me'. He recognised that we have CNS-organised spatial awareness in our minds that matches the spatial realities of our world. He saw that we image in fragments that might be like a slide show, were it not that we narratise. Narratising is our constant practice of stringing our data into stories. We hardly ever produce stories matching exactly as it is in our worlds, but inside it is our reality.

In our inner world we can anticipate what might come to be in our outside world. As 'analog I', we each venture experimentally into possibilities. The process of anticipation readies us for our next actions at incredible speed, yet with ability at times to go in slow motion. 'Metaphor Me' is a bonus. Not only are we able to view our world in our heads, we can also see our self, a 'metaphor Me' in the scene. One moment active agent in the drama, the next we are observing ourselves. Meanwhile, our CNS fine tunes our actions, all largely out of awareness.

Think of these processes as motor coordinated sporting prowess. We hold our breath at a fine golfer's green putt, or at an expert rugby conversion attempt. We have not the time for such pause amidst a netball game where a centre takes a pass midair in centre court, twisting her body to deliver a lightening pass to her goal-attack. 'Analog I' probabilities are being extended forward while 'metaphor Me' is constructed as a future projection, coordinated to have all bodily movements of precise sequence and speed geared to single-minded purpose. The organisation of mind through the coordination of the CNS is a miracle of complexity and holism. Especially this is so in relationships. There, future projection, social atom, creativity and surplus reality are active in the mix. Psychodrama has production methodologies that promote access to these streams of consciousness. Psychodramatic techniques open and vivify awareness. They promote healthy pathways of thinking, feeling and action.

Producing Amplification of the 'Ins' and the 'Outs'

Much insight in art, humour and theatre depends on disjunctions and sequencing that throws experiences into sharp relief. Psychodramatic production techniques produce oscillations of viewpoint from subjectivities to objectivities that sharpen clarity of awareness. Here I consider the elegance and effectiveness of psychodramatic production techniques. See how they are embedded in our natural means of gaining the freedom of our functioning forms through our lifelong development in spontaneity.

Real life has those very elements that psychodrama theatre requires as building blocks as it imitates and emulates life, as it is and as it can be. If life were to go as would be best, then as children we would have a trusted stage on which to learn. The first trusted stage would be the environment that parents create. On that stage we would each have

been welcomed and come to belong, have had our inner truths acknowledged, gained recognition of our selves, been valued for our contributions, and been assisted to discover how to enter into the feelings, values and motivations of others while able to see ourselves through their eyes.

Moreno (1946) envisages a phase of all identity where it is our right to know we belong - but with no guarantee. He sees a double phase where it is our right to have our unique experience validated – but with no guarantee. He sees a mirror phase where vision and recognition of ourselves in relationships is our right - but only if our caregivers are capable of recognition and coming alongside the child. Finally, in the phase of role reversal, it is our right to have mutuality, empathy and encounter with responsive auxiliaries – and again there is no guarantee that each child will know rich social relationships on a trusted stage.

Developmental processes and phases that have the power to promote the growth of spontaneity through childhood are alive and strong in psychodrama's production techniques. Group warm up and the promotion of communal belonging and of auxiliaries, each to each other, produces a setting for healing drama. Doubling involves a group member, recruited from the audience, standing at a protagonist's shoulder behind peripheral vision. He or she becomes an inner voice, tuning in to aspects of experience out of reach or inexpressible. Mirroring has the protagonist witness, from an audience position, a replay of a scene that she has just enacted. Observing herself functioning as a timid mouse may provoke her to intervene on her own behalf. The central actor's script emerges from the role reversing interactions between him or her and the people of their life drama. In Australia and New Zealand, more than in other countries, role reversal continues throughout a psychodrama.² The protagonist enacts each role first. One moment the protagonist is herself, then her father or sister, and then she is herself again. The auxiliary plays each aspect of role as the protagonist has before her. In concretisation the intangible or subliminal is made concrete. Body sensation or movement is enacted while an auxiliary actor is in the place of the protagonist. Experiencing a back ache, the protagonist focuses on this single element of his being. Warming up to the experience, he animates and personalises his body discomfort, giving voice to the meaning he discovers.

The production techniques of psychodrama bring to enactment our brains' processes which are working for us continuously. They amplify facets of separate streams of both conscious and unconscious cognitions and make them accessible. They offer a stage that can be trusted, a stage on which to learn anew the lessons of life which are our birthright.

Who has Naming Rights and Whose View is Real?

When role is enacted on the stage of life or on the psychodrama stage, who decides what the truth is? What are the effects of the act of naming? How is functioning form to be comprehended? I think it important to clarify who has the right to discern a functioning form and construct a descriptor. Does the person themselves have prime

claim to say how it is? We know that a protagonist knows some things and misses a great deal. We know that auxiliaries and audience can see and affirm things the protagonist does not know. Is the observer in a better position to depict another's functioning form? If so, which observer? Is it the one up close and personal, the one impacted full on? Or is it the one more distant whose attachments are less caught up? Is someone more distanced inevitably better placed? What if their social atom experience has a similar or common history? Such a one may have more intense emotional reactivity.

When I work with a client who describes a person who has dominated and oppressed him or her, I aim most of all to appreciate the client's experience. Whatever tag they come out with, what that means for them is my interest. They might say "Tyrannical Bastard". I might think "Cruel Oppressive Tyrant". I work like a double to feel into their experience and gauge the weight of their words. I consider the stage they stood on when abused - the context, the time, the power differentials and the values taken for granted. I think of the stage they stand upon currently as they deal with whatever it is they are challenged by. Functioning forms are sensed and engaged with as scenes are dramatised. The narrative is in the present and in action.

On a psychodrama stage the protagonist gives up naming rights and enters flows of experience in a theatre of truth. They may want to build up strength to stand against, or see need to withdraw and escape oppression. Role structure and social atom history may be contaminating performance and distorting their constructions and depictions of the way things are. Then, there is need of development. The director-producer notices when there is role taking rather than role playing. Health in functioning forms is worked for through interaction, and not by the director's analysis or wise judgment. Catharsis of integration and social atom repair move outward from within, balanced by movement inwards from the functioning forms in relationship interactions. The essential holism of movement and being is what touches soul, heart and mind.

Each person has their own viewpoint from their starting place. Each person has a private naming place within their cognitive filing systems. Psychodramatic staging has the capacity to loosen conserved positions and strengthen purposes. Production allows the dynamics to come alive and test realities. The protagonist is held in relationship where they know they belong. They are befriended as self and as their antagonists in role reversal. In all of this we are not diviners or arbiters of truth, but lovers of the protagonist. The more we appreciate them and delight in them, the more they will search themselves and trust themselves to realise themselves. It is on the stage we can know what role means. If we love our words and our depictions more than we love the protagonist, then both we and they are lost.

Good theatre produces good therapeutic conditions. Constructing therapeutic outcomes produces poor theatre and inadequate therapy. I believe that is because the director's heart and mind have moved away from the protagonist. If the life of the protagonist is produced with robust heart then the living script flows, and his or her healing imperative leads the therapy. Whenever you enter a helping relationship you have first to find a yes in you to the person or group. If you really cannot find a yes, then you are not a person who can help them. This fits for me with the Oscar Wilde character

in the play *The Judas Kiss* (Hare, 1998), who said “You can only know someone if you first love them”. It also aligns with Socrates’ reply to a mother who was beseeching him to be teacher for her son. “Woman I cannot teach your son, he doesn’t love me”.

Role attribution in accord with psychodramatic production must be lovingly respectful. Theatre is a place of encounter. Role has full meaning at the place where we meet and engage with a desire to appreciate and delight in this particular person, here and now.

END NOTES

1. The main passages from Moreno which relate to functioning form, role, spontaneity and allied factors throughout the paper are from: *Who Shall Survive* (1934). The pages cited are from the 1978 3rd edition - Preludes... ppixiii–cviii, Canon of Creativity pp39-48, Role pp75–77, Learning pp542-547. Also in the 1993 Student edition - Canon of Creativity ppII-20, Role pp47–59, Learning pp20I-207. *Psychodrama First Volume* (1946). The pages cited are from the 1977 print of the 4th edition - Introduction (Instruments) ppa-e, Role ppII-VI, God-act pp8-9, Spontaneity pp47-93, Role Definitions pp153-161. *Psychodrama, Second Volume* (1959). The pages cited are from the second print 1975 - The Unconscious pp45-88, Megalomania Normalis pp139-140. *Psychodrama Third Volume* (1969). The pages cited are from the 1975 second print - Universals ppII-29.
2. Within ANZPA, auxiliary egos are coached to spontaneity in role. However, when a character other than the one in conversation is to respond, the protagonist moves into that role as a consequence of the continuing role reversal. The auxiliary actors can thus find themselves playing several different roles in a drama, rather than sustaining a single role as is regarded essential in many countries. Remarkably, every actor enters into each role faithfully. All the participants’ spontaneity is heightened and none are locked into a role. With adequate sharing in the integrative phase, ‘de-roling’ is redundant.

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Don Reekie, Trainer Educator and Practitioner (TEP), is currently a member of the training staff of the Christchurch Institute for Training in Psychodrama (CITP) and The Moreno Collegium, Queensland. He knows that the psychodramatic method works. He has seen the evidence through producing a dance and drama rediscovery of an island nation's chant, dance and history for its Pacific Island community, in producing community-created mystery plays, in promoting renewal in maternity practice with professionals and mothers, in weekly Creative Living sessions and in working with men for more than a decade to stop violence and harness anger.