

Reflections of a First Time Producer

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SYNOPSIS

Anyone who has trained in the psychodrama method has experienced first time production. Many have a story or two to tell in this regard. In this short informal article, Jenny Postlethwaite tells her story of producing a psychodrama for the first time.

Introduction

As a first year student of psychodrama I have thus far participated in a number of skills training exercises focused on various aspects of production. Now, for me, a moment of truth arrives in the theatre of truth. I am about to produce a complete drama for the first time.

The Warm Up

You could say that my warm up to this moment has been quite protracted, some 18,413 days, each of which have in some greater or lesser way contributed to my presence, standing here, hand in hand with my protagonist, ready to begin. Or, you might put it at a much more modest 241 days, commencing with my very first exposure to classical psychodrama. But in the interests of brevity let's call it 113 days, my official tenure as a student of the psychodrama method.

In terms of learning, it has been a somewhat jam packed 113 days. Between training workshops, supervision, reading, writing and hours of personal reflection, I have swallowed, if not yet digested, a veritable smorgasbord of new language, contexts and concepts. Some of these I found I had already tasted on the menus of other cuisines, in a different professional context or labelled with an alternative set of terms. Nevertheless, there has been a lot to get comfortable with, a lot to remember. And mountains still to learn.

I have been wrestling with a lot of detail. Is that doubling? Or is it mirroring? What is the difference between the two? How do I know which one to use when? Remember the phases, warm up, enactment (don't forget the contract), sharing; the instruments, protagonist, producer, auxiliaries, audience, stage; the role theory,

adequate, underdeveloped, overdeveloped, absent, conflicted, coping, progressive, fragmented, somatic, social, psychodramatic (a veritable Cecil B. De Mille cast of thousands). And the scene setting universals, time, space, cosmos, reality; the levels of spontaneity, taking a role, playing a role, creating a role; the action cues; the housekeeping. Oh, and all that new material yesterday about the phases of a role training session. I am feeling a little exhausted simply thinking about it all. As for acting on it, we are about to put that to the test, the protagonist and I.

Prior to this point a few key things have fallen into place for me. At times, as an audience member or auxiliary I have been conscious of operating as little more than spectator to an engrossing drama, much the same as I might in a darkened cinema. Engrossed but simply along for the ride, whereas producing requires something much more. Where should I be looking? What should I be looking at? What should I be looking for? In discussion with my wise supervisor I learn that we all see different things. What is most important is that we actually do something with what we see. Okay.

I have also been mindful of the producer's duty of care to the protagonist. I am not concerned, but certainly aware of the responsibility and of not taking it on underprepared. Happily for me this has come up for discussion at an earlier training session, in relation to another first time producer, where I am reminded that our trainer will also be there to look after the protagonist and me. I slap my forehead. "Of course they will." My warm up shifts slightly, from 'producer' to 'trainee producer'. That is better. Okay.

I have had a brief discussion with my trainer about the support I think I would like from her when I do produce for the first time. "I need to know that you are right there. And I need you to give me enough space and time to have a go for myself." The discussion goes well. Okay.

In my last supervision session I explored the idea of drawing a big schema, in order to somehow put everything a producer needs to remember into context. It seemed like a good idea at the time, although I never did get around to doing it. And paradoxically our discussion generated a new list of things to remember, principles of the method.

Our supervision conversation finished with me saying, "Sooner or later I'll have to have a go. I won't learn sitting down". I have been creeping ever closer, without actually being fully warmed up to stepping up. Then, earlier today, I realise that I am now the last of the 'kindies', the new intake of trainees, who has yet to produce a drama. If I do not take the opportunity today it will be two months before another chance arises. I do not want to be sitting with that for two months.

The Enactment

So here I am. Here we are, me, my protagonist and our audience. And we begin.

Along the way I find I am conscious of various things. I am fully focused on

observing the protagonist and I move about to maintain my line of sight. She is my prime focus, at times to the exclusion of the auxiliaries, other than when we stand together observing the stage. I am pleased in the moment that I have not slipped into 'spectator' mode, although I am wondering whether I should be paying more attention to the auxiliaries as well. And I am not comfortable when I end up boxed in on some part of the stage. Even if I am not actually moving, I am more comfortable knowing that I can if I need to. I begin to get a feel for positioning myself in order to avoid being boxed in.

I can hear appreciative audience noises from time to time when I take some action. It is comforting to know I am on the right track. I see the protagonist caught in a stuck relationship, rocking gently up on her toes. It is something to work with. Yes, do something with it! I move beside her and double the action, maximising it a little by leaning forward. It is having an effect. She is responding to the doubling. Things begin to move. Whenever I say, "Reverse roles" I see it is my hands that do the moving, as I point each of my index fingers down and across each other like some aging disco queen. I am internally amused and intrigued by the reflexive way it keeps happening, without actually being distracted by it.

I invite the auxiliaries to mirror one of the protagonist's roles and one of them begins to model a new role instead of mirroring the existing one. I notice it and decide to let it play out, rather than interrupt the flow. It seems like the best choice in the moment. Later, an auxiliary is modelling a new response. The protagonist and I observe as she builds a structure on the stage with cushions. It seems to be taking forever. The protagonist is at first curious but then appears to lose her warm up. We have a conversation as the cushion construction continues. The protagonist says that she has tried this approach before, to no avail. The construction takes still more time and I am conscious of some rising impatience within me (an early pointer to later events as it happens). I am concerned about the protagonist's loss of warm up, but wait to see what happens. I direct the protagonist in a run of role reversals, conversing with a double. At one point I no sooner have her step into one role - she has not even spoken - than I instruct her to reverse roles again. Not surprisingly she looks confused, the audience members make odd noises and I let out an internal 'Doh!' I immediately shake my head and tell the protagonist to ignore me. It takes only a moment for us to get back into the groove.

The protagonist, now standing beside me observing the action on the stage, has become more spontaneous. She actively expresses her impatience with her stuck system, both verbally and by clicking her fingers. I double the finger clicking, maximise it and move forward toward the on-stage auxiliaries. Then I realise that I have left my protagonist behind. She is back behind me, looking a little uncomprehending. Another 'Doh!' moment! I realise, in the moment, that one of my own issues has been triggered, my impatience to get on with my own change. Whilst I was not experienced enough to catch myself before I acted, I am happy that I have realised what has happened and so am able to quickly step

back beside the protagonist and continue on with her, with no harm done.

The protagonist's spontaneity kicks in strongly at a certain point and the drama really takes off, as she develops a new, progressive approach to her situation. The drama finishes with everyone dancing with the protagonist as she laughs happily. Time has flown. It seems that we have no sooner begun than we are done.

The Sharing

We all share with the protagonist our personal connection with her drama. Not surprisingly, my sharing recounts my own impatience with aspects of my own development. I express the difficulty of needing to be patient, even though that means dealing with the discomfort and pain of things as they are. On hearing my story, the protagonist becomes quite teary. It is a point of connection between us.

The Processing

Following on from sharing with our protagonist, the group moves to provide me with some feedback on my production debut. "I really liked the way you got started. The protagonist didn't have a specific scene to work with. I would have struggled around that for ages but you just had her put her uncomfortable feeling out on the stage." "The way you got beside the protagonist and doubled her was great." "You're a natural." (Aside to Universe: "Hmmm. I am not owning that. But I am enjoying receiving it." So it makes it into this story.) "You were patient and kept working with the protagonist in her stuck system until something finally moved. So she was able to fully experience the forces holding her back. And then fully experience the new motivating forces as she became more spontaneous." (Aside to Universe: "Oh, is that what I was doing?") And, from the protagonist, "It was good having you with me. I knew you were always there for me".

As this very positive feedback flows I am glancing from time to time at our trainer, a woman who sees me very well and is adept at doubling me and telling me what I need to hear. She is nodding, looking happy enough, but she is not saying much. Un-naturally quiet. In fact, has she said anything? Finally she asks me a question. "How do you think you went?" Perfect. The question I mean, not what I said in reply. In this moment the most useful action is for me to reflect on and express, for myself, my experience as a producer.

I think I did well enough. Although a couple of times I got lost, I never felt I lost myself. I knew I could look over to my trainer at any moment for help. And I felt quite comfortable in the moments when I needed to do that. Given my inexperience I was really happy that, on the odd occasion when she proactively offered a suggestion I had already been thinking along the same or similar lines, albeit not quite as rapidly. I thought I did a good job of picking up on the protagonist's physical cues. When she started rocking up on her toes I doubled

the movement and it was a turning point in unlocking her spontaneity. I was also happy that when I did not quite get it 'right', my 'Doh!' moments, I did not let that disturb me. In fact I think I recovered reasonably well. Yes. Happy enough. Good enough.

Subsequent to the formal wrap up of the group, one of my colleagues had further conversation with me regarding the different perspectives of producer and auxiliary. "When I was on stage in auxiliary role", she said, "I had been wanting you to do something particular with the protagonist. But just now, when you were explaining to us what you had been thinking and doing I realised that, as an auxiliary I couldn't see everything you could see as the producer. It has reinforced for me that when I produce I should have confidence in my view of the whole drama and not allow myself to be disturbed by interjections from auxiliaries who may not be able to see the whole picture." As well as reflecting her own development as a producer, my colleague's comments had the effect on me of reinforcing the authority that sits with the producer and my own comfort in stepping into that authority.

So, the drama was done. The work was good ... enough. My protagonist was happy with the outcome and I was happy with my efforts. The day ended. We all went home.

But the dough had not quite finished rising. The following day, whilst out for my morning walk, I was recalling the drama and a new realisation came to me. As I had stood there, hand in hand with the protagonist ready to begin, there was nothing going through my mind. All the noise had abated. I was just there, in the moment, ready to go. And as the drama unfolded, that was the way I continued to be. I was, in a sense, operating on intuition. On the intuition of 18,413 days, of 241 days, of 113 days. Not consciously thinking, "Should I do this now? Should I do that now? What should I do now?" But rather, just doing what came to me based on what I was seeing. When every now and then nothing came to me, I naturally and unconcernedly could and did turn to my trainer for help.

I experience this inner quiet at times in my coaching and facilitating work. It is a very calm and uncomplicated place to inhabit. Uninhibited. Undefended. I like it. And I like that it came to me as I stood there, hand in hand with my protagonist, for the first time, ready to begin.....



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