

Delightful Moments for a Toiling Psychodramatist

by Max Clayton

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I have in mind that I am not the only psychodramatist who sometimes feels daunted by the task of conducting yet another series of personal development or training groups, and yet, when the work of the group has commenced there are, yet again, delightful moments of learning that result in a revitalization of vital energies.

This brief account of part of a training group represents an effort to recapture, in a small way, several moments when I found my failing vision and energies renewed. This is not the first time this has occurred. In fact, over the past thirty years of learning and practising the psychodrama method I have frequently found myself feeling flat and uninspired, only to discover that there is more in me yet. I trust that these moments will continue to occur for years to come.

I am approaching the beginning of the sixty-third year of my life, and, I presume, I am writing like this partly due to approaching the end of the ninth seven year cycle of life. I have been caught up in many memories of work in psychodrama training groups in Australia,

commencing in Perth in early 1972. Without going into detail, I want to say that the many clear memories of individuals and groups of people at work have been causing me great joy. But now let us have a look at this particular group.

A Training Group

I was working in Hungary in December 1997 and late one afternoon had been conducting a training session in the town of Sepszard. This is a town of 60,000 people in the southern part of Hungary. The training group consisted of thirteen professional people, most of whom had been working in the field of psychiatry. They had been meeting together regularly for most of the year, and I had been invited to work with them on this one occasion prior to conducting a three day workshop in the city of Pecs, an hour drive to the south.

Description of Part of the Training Group

The incidents I have chosen to present and discuss took place after

the initial introduction and warm-up to the work of the training group. The description commences immediately after the moment when a psychiatrist had experienced a memory of himself as a six year old boy with his mother. He saw himself with her at home. He was lacking affection and emotional contact.

I had suggested to him that he create an enactment of this scene and that he select someone from the group to direct this drama. He readily selected someone to be the director.

The Interview and Interventions by Myself as Trainer

This section focuses on the very beginning of the interview and a rather lengthy intervention by the trainer. It was during this intervention and the subsequent new functioning of the director that the first moment of delight took place.

First Moment in the Interview

The director and the protagonist are sitting alongside one another on the action space or stage. The director looks at the protagonist, and, while leaning around toward him, she says: "Would you like to look at the scene with your mother?"

My Assessment as Trainer

My assessment was as follows. The director of the session was drawing the attention of the protagonist toward herself. She was worried that the protagonist may not like her and therefore she must show him what a good, nice and caring person she was. She attempted to convey this by looking at him and leaning toward him. I also concluded that she was

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not conscious of the fact that the protagonist was already warmed up to a scene, that he had already visualized it, and that she could assist him to be more finely tuned to the details and content of the scene by having him focus on it for a longer time. In order to achieve this she would need to value his existing warm-up to the scene by crisply directing him to continue picturing the scene on the stage, to see the details of it and to listen to the sounds or speech that were part of the scene.

Intervention by the Trainer and the Director's Response

The trainer teaches her to stay oriented to the stage and not to look at the protagonist or lean around

toward him. The trainer also teaches her to speak to the protagonist objectively while oriented to the stage. He suggests to her that she say something like: "Look at yourself and your mother on the stage." The director's response to the trainer was: "I cannot do that."

Further Assessment by the Trainer

I concluded that the director was not warmed up to picturing the sociometric system of the protagonist on the stage, and did not see value in the protagonist focusing on himself, his mother and the relationship between them.

I developed the idea that the director would develop a warm up to this through an indirect approach. The approach I had in mind was to have every second person in the group function as director for the person next to them and that the pairs would work one after the other so that those directing later would learn from what had previously been done. Each director would instruct the person next to them to see themselves on the stage while they as director maintained a focus on the stage.

Directing Practice by Group Members

Every second person was instructed to act as director and to conduct part of an interview with the person to their left. They were told to sit alongside their protagonist, to instruct them to look at themselves on the stage, and while they spoke not to turn toward the protagonist either by moving their upper body or moving their head. Every second member of the group did this in turn, and, after several group members had completed this task,

this type of directorial functioning began to take on a greater meaning for everyone in the room. The individuals who were spoken to in this way were easily able to focus on the stage and to make a visual image. Where the director turned toward them or looked at them they were distracted. They either had difficulty completing the task or were unable to do the task at all. After their director was coached and functioned in a centered manner which did not produce emotional fusion, the experience of the person they were working with was markedly different.

During this activity one group member, who was in the role of director, spoke with a flat, disinterested voice and had no light in her eyes.. She was withdrawn. The trainer spoke to her in the following manner: "See if you can bring light into your eyes and a sense of enjoyment into your voice. The stage is your instrument. Love the stage. See it as a living thing. You have only been meeting in this place for a year but you have participated in a number of dramas here. You have seen significant things happen on this stage. See the stage as something filled with life. And while you are asking the protagonist to see themselves on the stage, don't speak to them as if there is nothing there. Relate to the stage as a friend. Enjoy it." In response to this coaching the director now spoke with life in her voice and light in her eyes.

After this piece of work the trainer had a conversation with this protagonist beginning with these words: "See if you can make yourself aware of your experiences in response to the two different things the director has done and let her know what your experiences are." In

response to this the protagonist said: "I felt life in me when you spoke the second time. I could see myself on the stage. The first time you spoke I did not feel connected with you."

After the completion of this group activity the drama with the psychiatrist continued. The director's functioning was quite different. She was pleased to be able now to focus on the stage and to invite the protagonist to see the scene involving himself and his mother.

My Experience in Response to this Learning

Every member of the group saw value in warming up the protagonist to projecting a social system onto the stage. This was a major factor leading to my experience of satisfaction and a renewal of my energies. The other thing that gave me pleasure was the fact that the group task that I had dreamt up on the spot appeared to be an effective learning instrument.

The Psychodramatic Enactment and Trainer's Interventions

The protagonist selected somebody from the group to be his mother. He warmed up to being with her in his childhood home. He then informed his mother of experiences as a child and then reversed roles with her. The director then conducted a brief interview and he began to warm up to his mother's role.

The Trainer's Intervention

In coaching the director to conduct this interview the trainer emphasized that a major aspect of the psychodramatic method was

warming up the protagonist in such a way that they expressed in words and action various things that were not expressed in the original scene in life. The trainer emphasized that we were not there to repeat what had happened in life itself, but rather to bring out the surplus reality level.

Subsequently, the director conducted a more lively and extensive interview and the protagonist entered into the role of his mother to a degree that he extended his experience and knowledge of her. He appreciated the extreme difficulties she had been dealing with in her life and why she had not been very responsive to him.

The director then interviewed the protagonist in his own role and there was increased warm-up and expression. Although he used no words he showed warmth and appreciation for his mother.

After this the director invited him to walk round the stage. While he walked he was invited to sing a song in which he expressed love for his mother and several group members were invited to walk behind him as doubles and to sing with him.

The protagonist withdrew slightly when invited to sing, however, continued to walk round the stage. Then he began to sing and as he continued to sing became more and more delighted. At this time a number of group members responded to him. One woman said to him: "I sing to my children. I do not have a good voice and my husband looks at me wondering what I am doing. But I enjoy it."

After everyone in the group had responded to him the protagonist walked over to his mother and hugged her. He was leaning over with the upper part of his body away from her and the director

began to go against what he was doing. The trainer, in the ensuing conversation with the director, learned that she perceived his method of hugging his mother as awkward. She wanted to have him stop and do it another way. The trainer encouraged her to give value to the warm-up of the protagonist so that the vitality in his warm-up would be available to him as he continued the enactment and would also be of assistance to the director. The protagonist continued to hug his mother in his own way and looked pleased and fulfilled. This was the conclusion of the action phase of the drama.

Concluding Reflection

The moment when the protagonist commenced to sing was one of wonder and delight at the capacity of the human spirit to rise above the forces pulling us down into mediocrity. There was the moment before the singing when nobody knew what he would do. Then there was the moment when he started to sing and there was the consciousness of the fragility and preciousness of a small beginning. And then there was the moment when his abilities came to life and his voice, movement, feeling, and commitment to life were expressed as an integrated whole. And there was the realization that in a short space of time a seemingly ordinary incident can become a profound experience for everybody in a room. Ordinary life is transformed into a blaze of glory.