

# Psychodramatic production of dreams: Their relationship to symbolising and the process of differentiation in human development

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Over twenty years ago, in 2003, I read Leon Petchkovsky's psychodrama thesis (Petchkovsky, 1983), which I found inspiring. In it, he presents himself as a psychodramatist and Jungian analyst researching dreams in relation to psychodrama. When I reread his thesis this year, I realised I had adopted his recommended practice in the psychodramatic production of dreams without realising it. I have subsequently tested it out over the years.

This paper is written to draw attention to the psychodrama of dreams through Leon's eyes in 1983 and present in my practice as it is now in 2023. In this paper, I present the production of a dream using Leon's approach, in which some dream elements are maximised, and an emerging association to the original family system is produced. This paper draws attention to the practice of working with symbolic elements in psychodramas and their relationship to the stage of the matrix of all identity. I present work that highlights the movement from intrapsychic symbolic experience into role relationships and show how this is central to the production of many psychodramas.

## Dream

A group member reports a dream during a group-centred warm-up in a workshop. She says: "I am in a hospital being met by two doctors who tell me I have cancer in my labia."

The person is then invited onto the stage to produce the dream.

## Production

Two doctors sit on the stage next to each other in chairs across from the protagonist, who is lying down. Each person is interviewed briefly for role before the protagonist enacts each role as it happened in the dream.

The first doctor is a trainee, and the second is the lead. The lead doctor tells the protagonist she has cancer in her labia. The protagonist accepts this without apparent feeling.

The production of the dream is complete as it is, and we flow into the next phase of the production within the same scene.

Two auxiliaries are now chosen; one as the protagonist's labia and one as cancer. In an interview for role, the labia say "the meaning of my existence is pleasure." Cancer is interviewed for role and then says to the protagonist "I thrive by devouring you, then when you die, I die too."

In role reversal, the protagonist is reminded of her mother, who is chosen and stands behind the doctors. In the interview for role, the mother is ambivalent about her daughter and oriented to her own life's suffering. In response, the protagonist says she is willing to die because there is no pleasure in living.

## Discussion of the dream production

Leon reminds us that Moreno's original approach to dream production begins with the protagonist going to bed and, while sleeping, remembering the dream and recounting it from start to finish. Then, the director produces the dream, and the protagonist returns to bed. Leon points out that accuracy is of central importance in dream production and that if this is done, it is possible to extend the production significantly. The production must be accurate so that the dream is not distorted. This means the auxiliaries must enact their roles in a manner that brings the dream to life precisely as it is, and the director must focus on accurately reproducing the dream before expanding the production.

The dream described above is brief, and care is taken to apply this notion of accuracy. The scene is set. This includes an interview for role with the protagonist in each role so that the auxiliaries are assisted to warm up. The dream is enacted fully from start to finish using role reversal. The protagonist expresses herself as the lead doctor, then the protagonist experiences this expression as herself and makes the response she made in the dream.

## Symbolising and symbolism

The dream presents a symbol laden with the subjective meaning of the protagonist, central to the dream and not yet produced. Now that the dream has been enacted, the production can develop a felt experience of the meaning. It helps in my understanding to think of this in terms of the principles of warm-up and maximisation. The protagonist is directed to choose auxiliaries as her labia and her cancer. A brief interview is conducted with each element. Thus, the protagonist warms up to the experience and the motivation in each of the two elements of the symbol; these are

intrapsychic elements rather than roles. As she becomes herself again lying down, the protagonist has an association; she is reminded of her mother, and thus, a role relationship can be produced between her and her mother. This role relationship might be produced in a new scene as it relates to her relationship with her mother in her early life. Here, as we are producing a vignette, she places her mother on the stage, and a brief exchange is produced between her and her mother with role reversal.

This movement from the production of symbolic intrapsychic elements expressed in a dream into a role relationship is a product of the mobilisation of spontaneity as warm-up deepens. In terms of Moreno's developmental frame, when working with symbols, we are working at the stage of the matrix of all identity at the point of the split between fantasy and reality (Moreno, 1977). Essentially, felt experience expressed as a dream symbol comes into meaning in the protagonist's mind, language may be added, and a role relationship is remembered here.

I have noticed that this movement from intrapsychic experience into role relationships is central to the production of many psychodramas. Role relationships exist between people; however, people have intrapsychic experiences. For example, a person who experiences a critical voice that drives them in life often has no memory of the original social atom role relationships within which the experience developed. The production of the voice is not a role as it is an element of an intra-psychic experience; however, its production may lead to remembering whose voice it is, and thus, an original social atom scene can be set, including the original role relationships. Doubling may be needed as we are working at the stage of the matrix of all identity or, in the case of remembering a critical voice, the stage of the double. The protagonist's expanding awareness here results from the mobilisation of spontaneity brought about by using production and attending closely to the process of expression and deepening warm-up.

I discovered that this principle of accuracy is also true when producing an original social atom psychodrama. In my view, scenes in which ancient memories are brought to life on the stage must feel true to the protagonist's actual lived experience as it rests in their psyche. The mobilisation of spontaneity then follows as the protagonist brings their current awareness to life, assisted by the auxiliaries, the producer, and the method.

It is worth taking a closer look at this relationship between the representation of intrapsychic experience and the development of psychodramatic roles.

## Discussion of symbolising and metaphor

Meaning-making can be understood through the human capacity for symbolising, which bridges fantasy and metaphor into felt experience and language.

*One of the symptoms of alienation in the modern age is the widespread sense of meaninglessness... We can scarcely avoid the impression that people are experiencing the disrupting effects not only of an unsatisfactory childhood experience but also of an upheaval occasioned by a major cultural transition.*

Edinger, 1972, p. 107

Symbol is a name given to personal subjective production of elements laden with meaning that, when placed together, connect us to a wider experience of our humanity. Our use of language is a symbolising function and is frequently assisted through doubling. It at once denotes collective meaning (words) discernible to others and simultaneously carries the personal subjective meaning that lives as feeling, images, memories and ideas in our experience. Thus, a symbol is comprised of elements connecting felt experience with language: personal and collective, felt and thought. Our meaning as a person is personal and communal; however, the process of differentiation involves each of us in bringing meaning into the personal experience of existing. One product of this is that the narratives that inform our experience are accurate not just for ourselves but also in relation to the system. This requires role reversal.

Suppose we understand dreaming as a process imbuing existence with meaning. In that case, it is essential for psychodramatists to treat dreaming subjectively and the whole being of the dreamer as paramount in meaning-making. The symbol integrates into awareness as its elements make a felt sense to the person to whom they belong, and this, in turn, changes the perceptions the person then has. While attention is often paid to the catharsis of integration towards the end of a psychodrama, this integration of elements in the early phases of a psychodrama is paramount in developing the awareness and perception necessary for new role development emerging later in a psychodrama.

Metaphor, including fairy tales, on the other hand, are collective and through which each person may locate themselves in a broader human context. If metaphor arises in the memory of a protagonist, then care must be taken in discerning the personal elements from the collective. For example, if a protagonist sets out to concretise the fairy grotto they played in as a child, then whether there is a fairy king and, if so, how he functions is known by the protagonist and cannot be known by the auxiliaries. Even though the experience of playing as children in fairy grottos is likely common among group members.

## Discussion of differentiation

The term differentiation is helpful because it connotes the development of psychodramatic roles that are not present and, therefore, differentiated

from the role system of the original social atom. Awareness of the subjective or personal meaning of experience and its relationship to the original social atom experiences is essential in Moreno's notion of differentiation. We might also use the term liberated, which places emphasis on the system, and Jung uses the term individuated, which places emphasis on the individual. However, Moreno's term differentiated seems to emphasise both the process and the outcome.

This paper considers a person's development through dreaming and within the context of a person's original social atom. Moreno's emphasis on the relational nature of human development and differentiation, as outlined in his *Spontaneity Theory of Child Development*, was prescient in predicting the path of the development of psychotherapy as a relational practice over the next 100 years.

Moreno states:

*The first universe ends when the infantile experience of a world in which everything is real begins to break up into fantasy and reality. Image-building develops rapidly, and the differentiation between real and imagined things begins to take form.*

*It appears that the infant goes, in his first universe, through two periods: the first period is the period of all-identity, in which all things, persons, and objects, including himself, are not differentiated as such but are experienced as one undivided manifold; the second period is the period of differentiated all-identity or of all-reality, in which objects, animals, persons, and finally himself have become differentiated. But there is no difference yet made between real and imagined, between animated and dead, between appearances of things (mirror images) and things as they really are.*

*The transition from the first to the second universe (that period when he becomes aware of reality and fantasy) brings about a total change in the sociodynamics in the universe of the infant.*

Moreno, 1977, p. 68

Moreno is describing the period when a person's being creates the first psychodramatic roles by integrating fantasy with reality in the context of relationship and beginning to use language to symbolise one's experience to other people.

*According to telic theory, the development of telic sensitivity is closely linked with the matrix of identity and the development of the cerebral cortex. As maternal figures and infant slowly grow apart and the identity pattern weakens, telic reciprocity steps in and operates as the residual function.*

*Telic reciprocity proposes that A and B are an interactional, co-operational unit, that they are two parts of the same process, although occasionally at different points in space and time. Telic sensitivity is, therefore, a two-way process, sensitivity of the parts “for one another”: it is by experience mutual and reciprocal, what benefits one benefits the other. It is productive because it is both ways and continuous.*

Moreno, 1955, p. 276

Moreno is describing how the particular tele experience with maternal figures carries with it particular content that informs later development and lays the foundations for the development of the first psychodramatic roles. Social self-schema neurological research has established that there is an area of the brain that records the actual original social atom as it is experienced, and this area of the brain develops prior to the cerebral cortex. (Carter, 2014, pp. 45-59). The development of the cerebral cortex is associated with the development of language. These later scientific discoveries support Moreno's description of the stages of early development including the importance of early relationships in laying the foundations for the emergence of an experience of self.

In his paper *Role Theory and its Application in Clinical Practice* (1994), Clayton highlights the differentiation process in human development through the life span. In placing roles into gestalts of fragmenting, coping and progressive, he highlights that coping functioning develops as a progressive solution to overwhelming experiences in the original social atom that risk fragmentation. The creative genius involved in surviving these overwhelming experiences results in survival-based functioning, which he calls coping. The person develops the ability to cope, but in doing so, the roles developed are also restrictive, lacking vitality and freedom. As people address original social atom experiences that risk fragmentation later in life, they create new progressive solutions that were impossible in the original family system. Thus, as they address the lack of freedom, vitality, and adequacy they experience in living, they develop roles that are differentiated from the functioning of the original family system. These roles are categorised in the progressive gestalt because the solutions they express are not restrictive. Differentiation, or becoming who one most truly is, is a lifelong process because what a person perceives as restrictive evolves over time.

Max Clayton's frame for role development of fragmenting, coping and progressive is tremendously flexible because coping functioning can be developed at any point in a person's early life, from infancy onwards. This frame emphasises the development of what Moreno terms psychodramatic roles, which contain subjective meaning-making, and the spontaneity associated with vitality, relational adequacy and the capacity to generate

what one values in the world with other people. As such, doubling, mirroring, and role reversal are all relevant.

## A psychodrama integrating elements in the development of a new psychodramatic role

I will describe a second psychodrama now to ground and make clearer the content introduced above.

### Scene 1

The protagonist sets a scene that she describes as located in 'Fantasy Land'. She divides the stage into two halves with a long black cloth. In one area, she places a red cloth (fire) and a clock to represent her original family system. In the other area, she chooses an auxiliary to be her heart and an auxiliary to be her panther.

The heart and the panther express themselves to each other with role reversal, and it is evident they are in conflict. The heart describes the panther abandoning her to hurt and humiliation in her original family system as she sought connection. The panther describes the heart seeking love regardless of how she is treated, and she is frightened that the heart will do this again without awareness or consideration of the value of her love.

As the heart and the panther get to know and value each other, the conflict resolves. The heart commits to loving herself first and others in a manner that is not self-abandoning. The panther commits to using its awareness to protect her from annihilation. As they arrive in this new relationship, they agree to a union where they do not leave each other.

### Scene 2

The group members are invited as 'her people' to a marriage between the heart and the panther. There is a depth of sharing from group members with this now integrated whole person (role). The protagonist warms up to herself at eighteen, and an auxiliary is chosen. A feeling exchange develops in which the protagonist promises never to leave her again.

## Discussion of the psychodrama

From previous psychodramas, this protagonist knows that enacting the role relationships in her original family system will leave her fragmented, so she is seeking a way to feel unified, strong, and loving, differentiated from the role system present in her original social atom. One product of this work may be that she is able to enter into, experience and learn from the original family system without fragmenting.

In the matrix of all identity, everything is still possible. Each person's creative genius has not been narrowed down as a restrictive solution or response to the actual functioning of other people in the original social atom. However, it is also the time before there is a self, enacted as psychodramatic roles. The symbolic elements produced in this psychodrama are laden with the experiences of living and the possibility of becoming. They are also fragmented from each other as a result of the experiences in the original family system. Spontaneity is mobilized as a result of the production, and the protagonist integrates elements rich with lived experience and meaning into a new psychodramatic role. This is an example of Moreno's notion that the self emerges out of the matrix of all identity.

It is helpful to recognise that when psychodramatists are working at the stage of the matrix of all identity and the double, we are often resolving emotional fusions that can be experienced as all identity but also lack a differentiated identity. As each person differentiates through the course of their life, they come back to experiences of all identity, bringing with them a differentiated self — enacted as psychodramatic roles.

This is what David Schnarch terms self-validated intimacy. He provides a definition of differentiation that parallels Moreno's.

*The capacity for intimacy is directly linked to the ability to tolerate existential loneliness and the relativity of one's perceptions. Differentiation is what permits an individual to participate in a system — whether a marriage, a family, or a society — without being captured by it.*

Schnarch, 1991.

*People's ability to balance humankind's two most fundamental drives: our desire for attachment and connection, on the one hand, and our desire to be an individual and direct the course of our own lives, on the other. The latter refers to the ability to hold on to yourself when important people in your life pressure you to conform. Differentiation yields emotional autonomy — the basis of healthy interdependence and the foundation for intimacy and stability in long-term relationships.*

Schnarch, 2010.

The second scene in this psychodrama functions as a role test for the psychodramatic role emerging from the first scene. It is significant that the protagonist chooses the social matrix of the group as 'her people'. A group-centred warm-up is primarily a process of expressing and strengthening the telic relationships such that a healthy social matrix develops that supports the psychotherapeutic work of the group. In choosing the group as her people, the protagonist is expressing that the group is functioning as a



healthy social matrix for her such that she values and trusts the role test they will produce. This is an alternative social matrix to the matrix of the original family system. Moreno's description of tele above highlights that the telic experience of each person to each other are laden with feeling experience originating in the first relationship before the development of language.

## Implications

Applying the principles expressed here has led to a refinement in the production of many psychodramas. My hope is that the content here enlivens your practice, too, and contributes to refining awareness of how psychodrama assists human development, including attending to the important developmental processes in the earliest parts of life.

Moreno's work is central to this paper and continues to provide a vital cannon that has remained relevant as psychotherapeutic theory has evolved over the last 100 years. This is of central importance as psychodramatists draw on our theory in supporting practice and affirm its relevance to the psychotherapeutic community.

## Conclusion

I have drawn attention to valuing symbolising as a function of human development and as an expression of the mobilisation of spontaneity. I have drawn attention to its activation in doubling in dreams and in valuing symbolism and metaphor in psychodramas. This paper has emphasised differentiation as the central organising process in human development.

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