Setting the digital stage: Producing online groups

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Abstract

This paper describes how psychodrama can be effectively translated online. It emphasizes staging and purpose as central to successful virtual production. Drawing on Moreno's vision and contemporary practice, it demonstrates how core methods—including warm-up, doubling, mirroring, role reversal, and surplus reality—can be adapted for online environments. A case study involving mental health professionals demonstrates how online tools, playful interaction, and sociometry foster connection, safety, and creativity. It provides a stepping stone to illustrate how every emerging digital development, from text-based to AI digital companions, offers potential stages for psychodramatic production. They provide rich possibilities for intimacy, role exploration, and innovative enactments. The paper shows how online psychodrama offers transformative potential and new challenges for producers to experiment with new media in ways that respond to Moreno's overarching philosophy.

Introduction

I am in the middle of facilitating a group online. It is a mixed group, all mental health professionals, each with a different professional identity. They know little about psychodrama, but they understand working online. It raises the question: how do psychodramatists work creatively in digital settings? How do they produce effectively in virtual environments? It's the question I set out to answer both with my group and in this paper. Psychodrama's distinctive capacity to maximise spontaneity, vitality and connection underlines how much it has to contribute not only to online groupwork but also to its

growing literature. With accelerating digital developments, this potential is only beginning to be explored so that psychodrama's rich legacy can be fully translated into the virtual domain.

It is now nearly 80 years since Moreno first introduced ideas for using television and broadcasting technologies (*Psychodrama,* 1946). As he wrote, presciently,

> *every tele spectator will be able to televise himself back and so establish a communication between the therapist and himself, multiplying the potentialities of a visual telephone by millions.*

<div align="right">Moreno, 2014, p. 257</div>

If a producer wants to learn how to use action methods online, where do they turn? Internet texts include Nikos Takis' (2024) theory of presence and distance online, Fleury's (2020) psychodrama specifics online, Stouraiti's (2023) use of psychodrama in restorative justice training and, most extensively, Pavel Kornienko (2022) who describes how to conduct online therapy groups. These are just some examples that illustrate the method's potential in imaginative, transformative ways.

In this article I set the stage: I illustrate how to bring the instruments of the method, from sociometry to sociatry, alive online. I propose that key is staging and purpose, and paying attention to the hybrid setting of real and virtual environments. I walk through the steps of preparing, then producing, a specific online group. Given the different experience of boundaries online, I also confront some old questions raised by Max Clayton about boundary and flow (Farnsworth 2013). He demonstrated how, in person, the boundaries of relationships act to contain anxiety and to enable spontaneous flow. I am curious, is this so in a virtual environment and, if so, how?

Warming up

The group I am meeting are experienced mental health practitioners, each interested in exploring the online medium to its full. In preparing for our meeting, I visualise inviting each of them to explore every dimension of virtual group interaction, and to do so in real time.

My visualizing distinguishes what is different to meeting online and not in person. How do I anticipate the moment of greeting when we each turn on the camera, face each other, and enter our virtual

world? This moment of imagination starts to set the digital stage and instantly defines it against the stage in person. That moment also brings alive the virtual boundaries and constraints in moving online.

In practice, many groups simply take platforms such as Zoom, Teams or Google Meet as given. Participants struggle to turn on the camera and sound, to share the screen, find breakout rooms, use the chat function or perform the tasks required of them. In my view, such behaviour is restricted and conserved. We react in isolation to our own disconcerting face onscreen, or to the intimidating gallery of blank-looking others, each in our boxed-up chicken coops. Our internet connection may be unstable, or we may be calling from our phone in the car. Alternatively, we're stroking our lovely cat on camera or telling the kids, or our partner, to go into another room. We may be eating or drinking, or carrying the phone as we prune our flowers. Whatever that's like for us individually, what is it like for our online colleagues? To imagine this, as a producer, is to begin to role reverse with those I am about to meet.

It prompts my question for the coming group: how, together, do we make the most of this virtual environment? As a different medium and modality, what does this remote experience feel like, moment by moment? To discover this, as a group, I am going to invite my colleagues to undertake three practices, moment by moment, online: Explore-express-reflect:

1. Explore the dimensions of this temporary world,
2. Express their real-time experience to us, and
3. Reflect, together, on its meaning and value of what we've just experienced.

Imagining the group ahead as I plan begins my warm-up as a producer. I engage in my own surplus reality: I imagine the coming reality online and I anticipate the Hollander Curve (NSW 2008). This is the three-point arc of every group process: warming up to exploring the online medium; enacting and expressing our online experience; finally, sharing and reflecting on what we take from that experience.

In practice, there will be several cycles of warm-up, action and reflection. Online work requires this: it takes place in a hybrid environment. We are in two worlds at once, online with our colleagues and offline with our surrounding reality (Takis 2024). We join the group from our own world, but we remain within that world, subject

to all its existing dimensions. Only we know what lies beyond and behind the edges of our screen, or out of a window beside us – none of our group participants do. I anticipate that I will begin by addressing these physical realities. First, I will ask participants to play with their hybrid experience, revealing some small part, beyond the edges of their frame, to the rest of us.

Warm-up: the hybrid stage

When I'm in the group, my request to reveal a little of their offline world creates a remarkable warmup. To my surprise, individuals become quite coy about what lies beyond the edge of their screen. For some, it's an unexpectedly intimate act – much more exposing than they expect, despite such a seemingly tiny action. Their warm-up is low and the screen's frame provides a form of security, a boundary they can control. Yet, these reactions are an instant warmup to our process, because each member is instantly engaged. With a group more familiar with each other, I might invite further exploration: a protagonist willing to explore their anxieties about what they hide or reveal offscreen. There could even be a full enactment, depending on the group's sociometry. Either way, I can draw on many instruments of the method to set the scene.

I continue our warmup by moving focus from the hybrid to the digital environment. I ask, what's our joint experience if everyone moves their faces right up to their screen? Or moves right back? What if we jointly put our finger to the screen? Immediately, we discover a dimension of experience we rarely have in person. How often do you have your face right up to someone you hardly know? Onscreen, these are potential moments for enactment. The screen, and the screen alone, enables both intimacy and distance at once, created by the hybrid environment.

The hybrid experience reveals another important aspect: different responses to intimacy and distance online start to indicate different roles and role clusters amongst group members. If our purpose online is to explore these, then using the method between real and virtual worlds is revealing. This is specific to online work. It also suggests how, online, we can begin to investigate the group's social and cultural atoms, as Pavel Kornienko (2022) illustrates.

Gullo et al. (2022) draw on hybrid work differently; they notice how the negotiable distance between online and offline work benefits certain kinds of participants. As they write, this is particularly for those experiencing ambivalent attachments or social anxiety. These

participants can move in or move back, but still remain engaged. So, too, for neurodiverse participants who can manage their overwhelm without leaving. Psychodramatically, we can identify the emerging role constellations these responses indicate.

Producing and working online

As we continue our group warm-up, I am closely monitoring, as producer, the hesitancy, connection and flow of interactions developing onscreen. I am thinking sociometrically about how the warm-up is unfolding. I also consider how each individual's sociometry is changing: moving from the links in their physical surroundings to those developing amongst participants in our online world. As their offscreen links recede, those online grow.

It also recalls Kornienko's (2022) emphasis regarding simple online safety rules during this transition: stay present as a participant; let others know if you have to leave; mute your phone. Alexandra Lemma (2017) observes that online therapy still retains an 'embodied presence' because "in cyberspace we are still embodied. What changes is our experience of our own and the other person's embodiment." Significantly, this observation enables producers to keep psychosomatic roles in mind and how they influence interactions in this medium. Gullo et al. (2022) take the next step and discuss changes around conflict, avoidance, nonverbal communication, or discomfort in online group therapy. I take these up below.

Kornienko (2022) adds an important extra role for producers online. It is how they respond to the peculiarly electronic 'dead' silence found online. Beyond the normal face-to-face warmup with a group, he describes how to work online with this 'dead silence'. As he describes, active verbalising and noticing are interventions which develop the group warmup in important ways. They bring attention to the group's online boundaries and act to draw the group together. For example, noticing can bring awareness to intrusions onscreen (pets, friends, kids or partners). Likewise, interventions may highlight the unexpected exit of participants, or behaviours such as blanking the screen, eating, or lying in bed. Doing so develops the group warmup and expands producers' roles through what they observe, mirror, double, invite or expand with participants.

Active intervention like this is also active producing and it models effective interaction for other participants. In my group, for example, I introduced latecomers who notified me by text that they were stuck outside the group. Then, I invited them to notice and connect with

others in the room. An online leader responding and observing in this way invites everyone to notice, and respond. Warm-up and interaction grows, particularly online, as a producer continues to model and coach. This interaction also enhances safety and inclusiveness, enhancing the flow of virtual connection and articulating group norms about online behavioural boundaries. There is also the opportunity for a producer to discuss these online norms through what is noticed, experienced and reflected on (explore-express-reflect).

By now, I am fully involved as producer: staying alert and responsive, attending to emerging warm-ups, role systems and sociometry, and using modelling and mirroring through what I verbalize and notice.

Hybrid to online: surplus reality

In my planning, I moved from the participants' initial hybrid experience to their active digital experience. Now I invite them to play. First, I ask all of us to change our backgrounds – whether it's to a beach, a gnome's castle, an office suite or a fantasy domain. Every online platform has rich and differing versions of these. Next, I invite participants to change their appearance. What happens, as a group, if we don a hat, new clothing, glasses, or take up visages such as a fried egg face? Who onscreen can resist that? It turns out that my group of serious professionals can't resist it all. Soon, they're laughing and pointing at each other, putting on disguises and finding new features that I hadn't noticed. Is it obvious, too, how the group's warm-up increases. I become aware our role repertoire expands and we are linking onscreen virtual reality with the rich potential of surplus reality, where any imaginative possibility can enhance reality. In fact, such linking together has its origins well before the internet. The children's therapist, Barbara Dockar-Drysdale (1991), described long ago, how deprived children in her therapeutic community spoke only through the voices of their teddy bears. Is this so different, and no less magical with this online group?

Playing in this context is also learning, and I am inviting the group to maximise its learning by expressing and reflecting. Moreover, our group can use it as an opportunity for doubling, mirroring and role reversal. All of this is a warm-up to action: to individual dramas, sociodramatic or even sociatric enactments. Depending on the group's purpose, an online producer can mix virtual and surplus reality in ways that enhance both. This is a specific strength of online work.

Within my group, this experience expands our capacity to be auxiliaries to each other. Several participants in the group, for instance, struggled with these new digital tools. One member shows where to find and how to use them, patiently repeating where to look and what to do. He is modelling for us how to engage with new tech, and he doubles others to expand their own confidence online.

As a producer, the digital domain enables me to draw on sociometry, warmup, role clusters, subgroups and more, depending on my purpose with the group. In this group, it is exploration and warm-up to relationships online with each other. I also have other accessories to hand: chat facilities, transcription or recording if the group agrees. There are breakout rooms, digital notes, AI assistance and even online translation if we need it. As psychodramatists, we have a suite of electronic tools available many of which, so far, have barely been explored. They serve to expand the vast inventory of action methods which Moreno (1946), and his successors have already introduced. Together, they have long demonstrated how responsive action methods are to any situation or stage: axiodrama, bibliodrama, internal psychodrama, monodrama, psychodrama á deux, souldrama, the Therapeutic Spiral Model, Relational Trauma Repair Model, Sambadrama or Vedadrama. The online world to me is simply a new stage and a new form of exploration.

Working online

Once our group is at ease with these virtual possibilities, we can deepen our warm-up in other ways. In this context, 'at ease' means a degree of security and safety amongst us. As Max Clayton emphasized, our developing relationships sustain our sense of safety and expand our spontaneity (Farnsworth 2017).

For instance, I am considering how a group adapts to silence online. Silence online can be valuable but, as I commented earlier, the specifically 'dead' onscreen silence heightens our individual, 'boxed' separation. Unlike an in-person group, isolation invites us to retreat into our known, offline environment. Retreating amplifies isolation, undoing the online connection we have just been building.

As a producer, however, I use simple tools to stimulate spontaneity and connection. For example, I ask questions: "what do you notice about this silence, what's your experience of it; how exactly does it differ from silence in person?" To ask these questions invites a return to the trio of explore-express-reflect, a warm-up we have now well established in our group.

In asking, I am aware as a producer that I am doubling, mirroring and role reversing with this group's likely experience. I do so first in planning, then in practice. In action, I attend to the group's sociometry: who speaks, in which order, to whom, about what. I am aware of who is silent or responding non-verbally onscreen.

I notice the tele between speakers more readily: some have existing connections prior to the group, others not. The differences are often expressed through the vitality or reserve of their responses. How, though, does that assist with silent individuals online? I notice their non-verbal behaviour: their changes in posture or eye movement, or how engaged they appear onscreen, or not. I also monitor my own tele towards them and my internal responses to their online presence. They constitute clues on which to build if I stay alert to them.

Conflict online

I am also alert to conflict online, which can be between group members, myself, or the online group experience. Online, response to conflict takes different forms; someone switches off their camera, starts eating, or looks at other apps or messages on their screen, often without drawing attention. As an online producer, I can recognise and respond to this subtle withdrawal through a variety of action methods, and I can do so without creating shame. Stouraiti (2023) demonstrates how a single word, 'warmth', used in one sentence by participants, can achieve this in psychodrama with restorative justice. I utilise the method in other ways: through role repertoires, the group's sociometry, the nature of the encounter, or techniques like doubling, mirroring, or role reversal to help us.

In my group, for instance, one participant protested that his phone wouldn't allow him to change his online appearance. I knew this group member had a strong conflicted role cluster, so he could readily pick a fight, simply out of frustration. Instead, I invite him to say what he's enjoying about others' onscreen transformation. Increasingly, group members double and role reverse with his experience as he sits alone in his garage, and it helps him fully join our experience online. He warms up and, together, our interaction develops a new role for him: *curious online engager* replaces *angry isolate*. The collaboration assists our own sociometry, too, with the group's spontaneous response expanding a newly discovered joint role as a *capable group collective*. Even in such a short time, group members have come long way from our cautious beginnings.

With or without conflict, action methods give us choices as

producers. We can respond as my group did, or we can investigate conflict through sociometric choices, through action, even maximization, based on the group's warmup and our purpose. Online producers can also invite the group to explore-express-reflect on their experience.

Staging and purpose

To this point, our online group investigation appears to be mostly process and little content. In practice, the content emerges from our online process and active experience. In my group, our warm-up was to a specific purpose: how could we better work together online? We were setting the stage, but the intention was not to proceed to a full enactment. This raises the question: is full enactment possible online, or does the medium impose restrictions?

The answer turns on staging and purpose. Many studies emphasise how online groupwork can also be healing and reparative (Andrews et al., 2022). The five core instruments of stage, protagonist, director, auxiliary egos and audience are present, so is something missing?

For me, the answer lies in staging. In the physical world, we are present to each other – we hold, touch and directly sense each other. In the digital world, this is mediated. Yet, we remain embodied; all our sensory systems are still active and we are still present to each other. As psychodramatist Nikos Takis (2024) comments "The absence of the physical body from the sessions does not impede the delivery of group mental health services nor does it reduce their effectiveness". Pavel Kornienko (2022) outlines numerous approaches to maximize full catharses of abreaction or integration, both in his own workshops and those of others (Simmons, 2018, Pires et al., 2025). Together, they illustrate how to draw on the whole spectrum of action methods: continuums, group puzzles, dialogues in pairs, subgroups, vocalization in the warm-up to full enactment. Online staging and purpose, then expand the goals of coexistence, co-creation and co-production (Moreno 1946).

Different stages, then, create different potentials; each provides different opportunities and restrictions. In my group, the shifting anxiety and delight of connection displayed the movement between our hybrid environment and the different role clusters we brought to each.

This is similar with many online platforms, each of which offers the same invitation to spontaneity and invention as psychodrama has always done. They all respond to Moreno's original statement:

The burning problem now, as it was then, is the combination of two variables, the healer and an adequate theory or method.

<div align="right">Moreno, 1978, p.xxxiii</div>

So it is with my own group in its specific medium. In our case, we warmed up to exploring the medium's specific possibilities and developing our online relationships in the process. This was the online stage we set.

Although in my group, we did so through our platform's current resources, these resources continue to expand. Online interaction involves numerous stages, not just one. They may be sequential and text-based such as Reddit groups, text or email, instant small group audio or video e.g. Snapchat, WhatsApp or Signal, or mass messaging as in Flashmobs.

New stages such as these are still evolving and provide new opportunities for action methods. Like my own group, they illustrate the possibilities for extending surplus and virtual reality, and the potential reach of action methods in the process.

AI digital companions are increasingly commonplace. They pose new questions for psychodrama. For instance, therapist Marjorie Schuman (2025) describes her experience of interacting with a ChatGPT chatbot. She comments "how relational it felt" – a typical response with digital companions. Her chatbot's response, however, is confronting: "What you long for, ultimately, is not only attunement but encounter — the ineffable electricity of presence shared between living beings."

Compare that to Moreno's definition of encounter:

seeing and perceiving, touching and entering into each other, sharing and loving, communicating with each other.

<div align="right">Moreno, 2012, p.219</div>

What do we make of this as psychodramatists? Is a digital companion a legitimate auxiliary ego? Can a chatbot, "trained on a massive data set of human conversations" (Schulman, 2025) adequately double, mirror and role reverse? Is a chatbot another form of surplus reality? Digital companions are themselves a novel form of encounter and how we engage them within Moreno's philosophy is a significant question.

Boundary and flow in the online group

At the outset, I asked how Max Clayton's distinction between boundary and flow fits the virtual domain. In my online group, our boundaries were already active: the security of internet connection allows us to meet; there are implicit or explicit rules of online behaviour, an agreed time frame and an initial invitation to online action.

Everyone has experienced, from the pandemic onwards, what happens when these containers give way: we cannot connect or communicate; we engage in disputes about procedure, safety or ethics; we turn off our screens or sound. Our spontaneity evaporates and our anxiety and isolation expand.

With sufficient boundaries, online groups can explore and expand their flow. The flow is an interactive, subjective, felt flow – the warmth of a passionate group in action, playing with its potential as a community and with the digital tools at its disposal. As I wrote of Max Clayton's demonstration (2013, p.51), "the enactment creates a flow of energy, with a warm up to the progressive and functional aspects of a role." Containment, even online, "isn't something external to the psychodrama method, but something created through it" (2013, p.51). I am firmly of the view it is the method, not the modality, which creates both boundary and flow.

I have described elsewhere (Farnsworth, 2011, 2017), the relentless flow of individual text, email, blogging, social media and audiovisual content beyond any face-to-face or individual staging. The question for psychodramatists is how to integrate the whole digital spectrum, from chat to chatbots, within Moreno's broad, initial vision. This, for me, constitutes the potential that digital media offers to expanding Moreno's original vision and the method as a whole.

Conclusion

Setting the scene is the foundation for psychodrama on and offline. Online, it also sets the scene for the new acceleration of digital worlds. These offer psychodramatists opportunities to translate Moreno's vision into new, unanticipated domains. Psychodrama already possesses methods and a philosophy to do so. This article invites producers to utilize this medium to fulfil Moreno's dream 'to co-exist, co-create and co-produce.' Successful online production requires attention to specific concerns; firstly to the hybrid worlds

we inhabit; secondly, the key features of staging and purpose, and thirdly, to relationships as the foundation to sustaining boundary and flow in virtual production. New digital media invite us to explore, develop and maximise action methods for our mutual benefit as practitioners and participants.

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