

Taking sociodrama to the streets

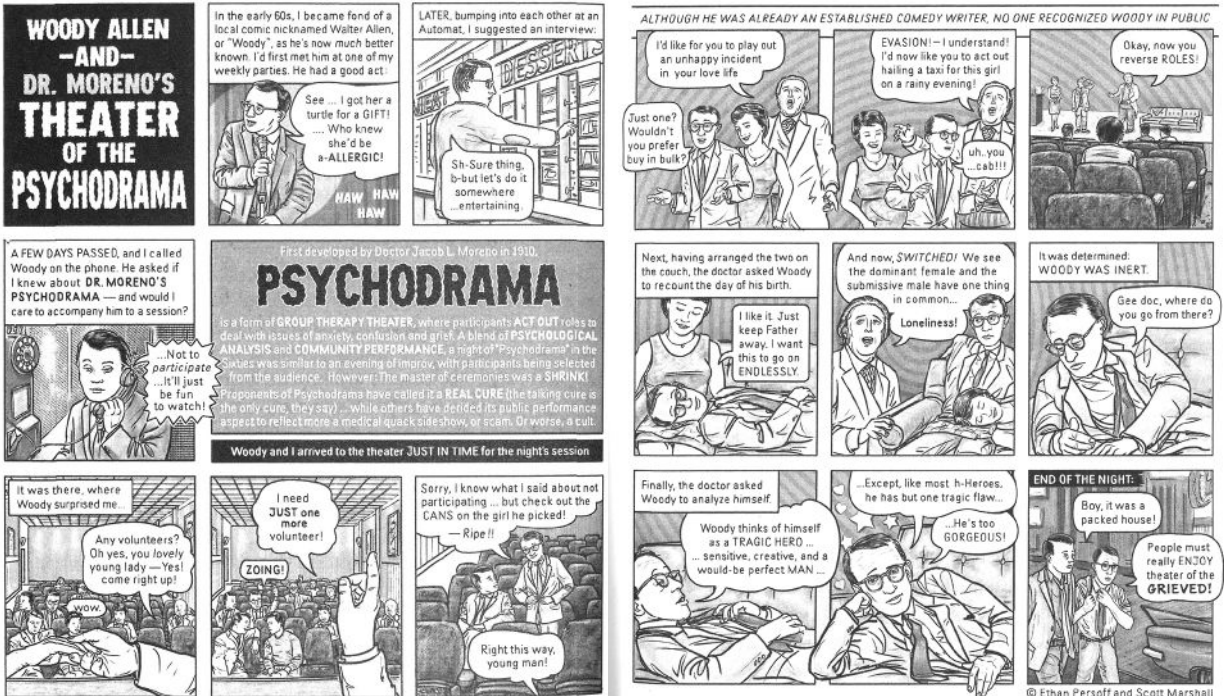
Cissy Rock

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My warm up

I wanted a fresh approach. My public sociodrama sessions of the last three years tended to attract low numbers. Flicking through *The Impromptu Man* I came across the cartoon by John Wilcock where Moreno is directing Woody Allen on stage. I was enamoured, a fizziness in my body at the thought of an audience exposed to the method and being enthralled by their experience. That was when the seed was planted. I could run such a session. I could attract more participants. I too could have an audience enthralled by their experience of the method.

JOHN WILCOCK: NEW YORK YEARS



Woody Allen and Village Voice columnist John Wilcock attend a night of Psychodrama in the early 1960s.

From the comic biography "John Wilcock, New York Years" © Ethan Persoff and Scott Marshall, used with permission. More information at <http://www.eptc/john-wilcock>

I consulted with Cher Williscroft, a New Zealand sociodramatist and Trainer Educator Practitioner, whose report I had read in AANZPA in AGM minutes about her running Living Newspaper sessions in Nelson. I remembered reading about Moreno running public sessions he called the Living Newspapers where he worked with illiterate people, using drama to bring the news to life, and encouraging critical thinking. It was a simple yet radical idea. Cher said one sentence that I was captured by “If I was to do it again I would do it at a Fringe Festival”²

That’s the fizz — a show, an audience of everyday people affected by the method, going back into their families, communities, workplaces having experienced sociodrama and it having had an impact. I thought of all the ripples and felt excited about the possibilities.

Planning

Cher was most encouraging, offering guidance as to how such a show might be structured.

I called the show ‘We are the Drama’ with a tagline that the audience are the performers and the performers are the audience.

To register with Fringe, I needed to have:

A confirmed venue,

Dates and times the event would happen,

Set ticket prices,

A blurb to describe the event,

A good quality image for publicity and marketing.

The hardest part was finding a venue but becoming part of Fringe was a well-supported process with a humming hub of people willing to help make my idea a reality. I made my way through the forms ticking high audience interaction and had an illustration depicting a stage and newspapers. I also added a rider saying that, ‘nobody will be asked to do anything they don’t want to’.

The venue was found by Fringe, an art gallery turned performance space for the night. Visiting the venue, I could envision a large circle of chairs and 15 or so people warming up to an evening of Living Newspapers. The event would be a 75-minute session run on three consecutive nights with a little added pressure at the end of the session to clear the stage within 15 minutes before the stand-up comedian started her show after me.

² The New Zealand Fringe Festival is an open access festival, providing various platforms for artists to experiment, present, and show new or refined works around Aotearoa.



I had 100 words to entice, explain and sell tickets.

The event would be part performance, part entertainment, part social therapy. As the director I would be in charge of the event as a whole taking account of the range of warm ups and expectations. I made sure I was well planned.

Event

As people came into the session, I introduced myself to each group member. When we started the session, I joked about participation to break the tension and get people laughing. I reassured them they wouldn't have to do anything they didn't want to. I sensed participants' anxieties drop and followed with a simple activity. I asked everyone to be teachers attending a conference. I wanted people to experience 'being' rather than 'acting'.

I handed out sheets of paper each with several headlines. I played a recorded voice-over of me reading the headlines.

Each person with a headline placed their paper somewhere on the stage. I then invited people to stand near the headline they were most interested in. I directed people to let others in that group know about why they had chosen that headline. After that I got them to report back briefly to the whole group. While it was obvious which headline was most highly chosen, I summarised the themes and elements from each group's report back so the commonalities between groups were identified and the interests of the group as a whole made apparent.

The following two were the ones chosen on different nights: "Homeless tents taken by council before Art Deco event", "Government's benefit changes: More people to receive 'work check-ins'".

Together we identified the individuals and groups that would need to be present for the situation to be enacted. I directed people to take up various roles e.g. politicians including the prime minister and finance minister, the media, the mayor, homeless people, advisor, council staff member.

Everyone took up their roles interacting with others according to the newspaper story. What struck me was the ease and enthusiasm people brought to the stage. During the enactment I used the technique of spotlighting to enable everyone to hear and get the gist of what was happening in other groups. I produced whole group role reversals, so people got to gain insight from different perspectives and experiences.

I encouraged audience participation by directing them to point to where they thought the power lay in the system and to say why they thought that. At other times I asked them if they thought some part of the system was absent and if so, who else needed to be present in the enactment?

After the enactment I directed the integration phase in which everyone shared something of their experience in the role(s) they had taken, what

they had noticed and what insights they had gained. This sharing was in alignment with what I had hoped; being part of this session expanded people's awareness of others.

Follow up

I planned to follow up participants after the event as I wanted to know what the lasting impact of the sociodrama had been. Five months later I approached participants that I didn't know that well and asked them the following questions:

- What did you expect?
- What made you come?
- What is still lingering with you?
- What felt substantial?
- Did anything stand out for you?
- Did anything not make sense or feel unanswered?
- Would you recommend this to anybody? If so, who? (like what type of person?).

The following is a sample of responses.

A CEO of a not-for-profit organisation who had attended with his partner and daughter had come because he wanted to support me. He thought the session was ok but he wouldn't recommend it to any of his friends. He did however think it would be suitable for people who liked to experiment. Nothing had really stood out for him. Talking further about his experience in various roles he reflected that it was very easy to be the mayor as he was used to making decisions. By contrast he said how hard it was being a homeless person experiencing the reality of how much was just being done to him that he couldn't control. He said that as a result of the experience he was more aware that things just aren't as easy for everybody as they were for him.

Two young public servants let me know they also came to support me and thought it would be fun. Neither could really get hold of anything that lingered. Their excitement rose as we talked a little about the headline chosen and they remembered people being the prime minister. One commented that it was really hard being the advisor and as a result of taking this role in the sociodrama they had developed a bit more sympathy for the minister's office. This generated a response from the other person who commented that it helped them see that they are working in a system. One of them said that the sociodrama had stimulated quite a discussion

between him and his boyfriend who had talked about the session all the way home.

One woman said she was unable to listen to the radio to hear the news as it just was too much for her but after the show, she found herself able to listen again. Somehow, she said she had remembered that we are all humans.

Another person had come because she loves the Fringe Festival and as a social worker thought my show could be useful. She had come with her friend and had spent the night talking about the experience. She said it had given her a visceral reminder that there are many ways of looking at something and that reversing roles around the system had helped her quickly to move from her mind into her heart and body. She could see how taking this approach with her students or teams she works with would be so powerful. She was excited that all these months later she still had vivid memories of being “forced out of one lane to another to another” as the lasting impact of role reversal has had on her.

Reflections and developments

Overall, I feel satisfied.

I set out to run a sociodrama that would attract an audience that would be excited and engaged by the method to the extent that it would have a real impact. I managed to achieve that. Although there were bits that were clumsy there was enough action, the drama wasn't like a role play full of hammy caricatures. Participants expressed themselves authentically, the role reversals enabled people to experience different perspectives, and the feedback revealed genuine increase in awareness, insight and spontaneity. All three sessions were different. One night 39 people attended with some people returning. I felt well supported by the Wellington psychodrama community and noticed the effect of having experienced people functioning as auxiliaries in the group facilitated the experience for people not familiar with the method.

The feedback has led to me making two changes that I will try next time:

1. Providing a readout summarising where everything finished e.g. “Here we have four homeless people feeling frustrated, here the mayor is struggling to ...” etc. The readout would not necessarily be conducted by the director but could be someone in the role of reporter or possibly one sentence from each role.
2. Allocate more time for the integration phase so everyone can make sense of what has been enacted and make more meaning of their sharing in terms of what ongoing impact the sociodrama has for them.

Connection with Moreno and continuing his work

I enjoyed reading about Moreno's influence of the Theatre of Spontaneity on modern drama.

The central task of the Viennese Theatre of Spontaneity between 1921 and 1923 was to bring about a revolution of the theatre, completely to change the theatrical events. It attempted this change in a fourfold manner:

1. *Elimination of the playwright and the of the written play*
2. *Participation of the audience, to be a "theatre without spectators." Everyone a participant, everyone is an actor*
3. *The actors and the audience are now the only creators. Everything is improvised, the play, the action, the motive, the words, the encounter and the resolution of conflicts*
4. *The old stage has disappeared, in its place steps the open stage, the stage space, the open space, the space of life, life itself.*

Moreno, 1971, p. 84

I'm inspired by this experience to take sociodrama to the streets. It doesn't matter to me that it's not perfect or that people don't have prior experience of the method. There are so many social issues to explore that are relevant to us all and I believe it is worth taking the chance to have our method facilitate the expression of our collective spontaneity and creativity.

REFERENCES

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Cissy Rock is a sociodramatist who is fired up by the power of relating to each other. With a huge heart, warm sense of humour and love of donuts and coffee Cissy produces relatable and participatory experiences.