

Staging the Therapeutic Experience

USING MORENO'S PSYCHODRAMA STAGE IN PARENTING GROUPS FOR WOMEN

CUSHLA CLARK

ABSTRACT

Moreno proposed the psychodrama stage as the first instrument of psychodrama. He designed it with four levels, the audience, the warm up step, the action space and the balcony, which mirror the stages of a protagonist's warming up process. Providing illustrations focused on the use of the warm up level or step and the balcony in parenting groups for women, Cushla Clark proposes that a psychodramatist who maintains consciousness of the structure of the Morenian stage, including improvising the different levels when physical constraints are present, is able to enhance a protagonist's warm up to spontaneity and produce a full and satisfying dramatic enactment. This article is drawn from Cushla's AANZPA thesis, *Liberation via The Stage*.

KEY WORDS

action space, audience, balcony, enactment, levels, Moreno, psychodrama, psychodrama stage, spontaneity, warm up, warm up step

The Psychodrama Stage

It is my hypothesis that the physical structure of the psychodrama stage can enhance a protagonist's warm up to spontaneity. In this article, I present examples of my work in parenting groups where I have held in mind Moreno's design of the psychodrama stage, particularly focusing on the use of the second level, the warm up space, and the fourth level, the balcony. Maintaining consciousness of the Morenian stage, including improvising the different levels when physical constraints are present, has certainly assisted me as a director to produce full and satisfying dramatic enactments.

In creating psychodrama, Moreno moved therapy off the couch and away from the dyadic relationship of client and therapist, to treat an individual in a group. He thus expanded the instruments used in therapy. "The psychodramatic method uses mainly five instruments – the stage, the subject or patient, the director, the staff of therapeutic aides or auxiliary egos, and the audience. The first instrument is the stage" (Moreno, 1994:a).

Informed by his experiences in the Theatre of Spontaneity (see Moreno, 1983), Moreno designed the psychodrama stage with four levels: the audience, the warm up step, the action space and the balcony or super-individual level, as shown in the accompanying photograph. These four levels mirror the stages of warm up through which a person passes in becoming the creator of their own life: “The first level as the level of conception, the second the level of growth, the third the level of completion and action, the fourth – the balcony – the level of the messiahs and the heroes” (Moreno, 1994:3).



View of the Beacon psychodrama stage looking towards the balcony, as photographed in 1936 (Moreno, 1994:268).

In Moreno’s view, this structure created a space flexible enough to portray all of a person’s experience, facilitating the exploration of the four universals of psychodrama. As Fox (1987:3) explains, “The objective of psychodrama was, from its inception, to construct a therapeutic setting which uses life as a model, to integrate into it all the modalities of living, beginning with the universals – time, space, reality, and cosmos – down to all the details and nuances of life”. And as Clayton (1991:24) maintains, “This circular stage with three levels and a balcony supported by two pillars enhances the continuous development of a protagonist’s warm up as well as the warm up to a range of different roles which allows different perspectives on life to develop”.

Using the Morenian Psychodrama Stage in Parenting Groups for Women

I have applied Moreno’s concepts of the psychodrama stage in a parenting programme aimed at assisting mothers and care-givers to develop non-violent relationships with their children. These parenting groups took place in various community venues where the space was often an

undifferentiated flat area with little room for action. The following two sections of the paper describe and illustrate the ways in which I improvised to create the different levels of the psychodrama stage under these constraints, in particular the warm up level or step and the balcony, and thus maximise the protagonist's warm up and produce a full and satisfying enactment.

The Warm Up Step

An improvised warm up level or step was an important feature of the psychodramatic work in the parenting groups. Through their participation, the women were immersed in a culture of mutual respect and a space where they could occupy centre stage, often for the first time. Stepping onto the psychodrama stage was 'a big deal' for them and considerable work was required for them to warm up. Moreno (1993:11) maintained that a person often has visions and dreams but struggles to realise them because there are "deficiencies in their warming up process". He therefore designed the second level of the stage as the warm up space or step, relating it to conception and growth. Here the protagonist develops a readiness or warm up for action. Through the process of warming up, the protagonist's spontaneity reaches a point where they are able to step onto the third level of the stage and 'act freely'.

In walking around the warm up step or level, a protagonist remains in proximity to the audience and the director. Through their appreciation of her dilemmas, their involvement and expression, the audience and director can thus assist her to warm up. Typically, there are a number of pre-requisites before the protagonist develops a readiness to step onto the third level of the stage, that of action and completion. Some of these include recognition of feelings and their appropriate expression, recognition of the warming up process and the ability to control its pace so as to avoid becoming overheated, an appreciation of the possibility of choosing one's warm up, and the development of a tender, loving and supportive attitude towards the self as a counter to harsh self-criticism.

Often, I worked at length on the warm up step, allowing plenty of time for a protagonist to gather resources, experience control and pace her warming up process. Typically, I doubled the protagonist's ability to stay connected to herself and others in the group, and when needed, I would be a loving and supportive companion and coach. For most of these clients, this was a new experience of warming up as a parent. In some cases, however, deficiencies in the protagonist's warm up were so severe that the process of getting to the point where they could step onto the action level of the stage was actually the major work. The following illustration of this process is drawn from work with Sara.

Sara has been attending the parenting group for five weeks. In the first session, she described herself as 'a very bad mother' but in the subsequent weeks she has become less critical of herself as a mother. In this sixth week, she describes an incident in which she is angry with her children and expresses a desire to change.

Director: *You want to do something different with your kids.*

Sara: *Yes, I don't like what I've been doing.*

I make an assessment that Sara would be a suitable protagonist as she is demonstrating that she is willing to be seen while feeling vulnerable. She stays in relationship to me, maintains eye contact with me and the group and answers questions. She is a willing adventurer.

Director: *How about we have a look at this scene?*

Together, Sara and I step onto the warm up step.

Sara: *I don't want to do this anymore. ... It's very hard to look at it.*

I notice that Sara is having a physical experience, looking down at the floor and withdrawing into herself. She has warmed up to the role of the ashamed revealer. At this point, I decide that it is necessary to build Sara up, to focus on her progressive functioning, to normalise her experience and to reduce her sense of isolation. I encourage group members to let her know that she is not alone here, that they all share these experiences as mothers and that they do not see her as 'mad or bad'. This is a significant piece of work for Sara and the whole group. With the other women's support, Sara has become more stable. She looks at one of the group members and warms up again to the role of the willing adventurer.

Sara: *I can keep going with this.*

My aim is to establish a place for the protagonist to have a positive experience of herself in relation to visibility in the group, and to develop new functioning as she warms up. My work as a director is done primarily through doubling as, given their own difficulties in warming up, the group members are typically unable to sustain auxiliary roles. Clayton (1992:84) describes the effect of doubling in such situations: "When a protagonist requires building up a double may be able to confirm a protagonist in their adequate functioning just by their physical presence. Confirmation may also occur through the double expressing themselves with the same words, emotions and actions as the protagonist. The protagonist immediately hears their own expression mirrored back to them, is pleased with what they are hearing and with what they themselves have just said, and breaks an old pattern of doubting their expression and trying to undo it. Thus, the double can be a powerful force for good through bringing about in individuals a confident and flowing expressiveness".

Sara proceeds to share her story with the group members. She separated from her husband seven months ago and is now struggling to parent on her own. Her husband has been critical of her parenting and Sara also feels guilty about the effect of the separation on her two daughters, Hannah, aged four, and Georgina, aged seven. Sara experiences Hannah as 'going against her' and Georgina as 'the good girl' who does as she is told. The girls have been in the care of their father for the previous five days and Sara intends to take them on a fun outing 'to compensate'. However, in the car park of the local mall, it is no longer fun as Hannah, her 'evil and defiant child' is refusing to get out of the car. Sara starts shaking and roughly pulling Hannah out of her car seat, at which point the child begins to scream. I ask Sara to set out this scene, choosing auxiliaries to enact the roles of herself and her children. She instructs the auxiliaries regarding what they are to say and do, and I coach them to accurately embody the roles and the role relationships. As the auxiliaries enact the scene, Sara walks around the warm up step and observes the action without taking part in it as yet. I double her, affirming her efforts to stay connected with herself and the group members from the warm up step.

Director as double: *I can keep breathing as I watch this.*

Sara: *Yes, I can.*

Director as double: *I can look at Mary (a group member) and she is smiling at me.*

Sara: *I like that.*

Director as double: *I can watch myself in this scene and not be critical of myself.*

Sara: *Yes. I don't seem to feel angry here. I am feeling sad.*

Sara looks down at her feet and takes a big breath. She looks at the auxiliary playing the role of Sara.

Sara: *I wish we were a family and we are not. Their dad and I are separated.*

Tears roll down Sara's cheeks. I continue to double her, and she reveals that she is trying to play happy families and pretend that she does not feel sad about the separation.

Sara: *I feel a failure as a parent. Hannah won't do as she is told. I have carefully planned this outing to be a happy one.*

Sara can more easily warm up to her spontaneity and creativity while on the warm up level of the stage, as it provides distance between herself and any over-whelming action. Standing there on the warm up step, with me as her double, she takes time to appreciate her own warm up. She feels the despair of the lost dream of happy family life and understands the reality of her predicament as a single mother. She realises that she, and not her daughter, is creating the conflict. As a result, she is freed from inner conflict and develops the role of the compassionate self-observer.

Thus far, Sara has been observing the enactment from the warm up step. At this point though, the auxiliary enacting Sara the sole parent becomes angry and pulls Hannah roughly from the car seat. Sara spontaneously steps from the warm up space onto the action level of the stage. As a compassionate companion, she walks over to Sara the sole parent, gently places her hand on her back and talks to her.

Sara: *Take a breath. ... Go home. The girls are worn out and need quiet time. Actually, you are feeling very sad about the separation and taking your frustration about this out on Hannah. She is not being evil. Hannah is tired and sad too.*

The compassionate companion Sara is moved to tears, and the auxiliary playing Sara the sole parent is deeply relieved and moved. The auxiliaries playing the roles of her daughters visibly relax in their seats. We close the enactment there. During the sharing, one group member expresses the realisation that in her moments of anger, her children are not 'being naughty'. They are just 'being children' and it is her stress that is causing her to feel angry with them. There are murmurs of acknowledgement from other group members. Another participant shares her hope that, in seeing Sara 'do something different', she might change too. I feel satisfied with the depth of sharing. It is a pivotal moment when a parent can take responsibility for their angry reaction to their child, as it means they no longer blame the child and begin to realise that they can make a change in the situation by changing their own behaviour.

On reflection, my particular purpose had been to address deficits in the protagonist's warming up process and her insights, as she walked around the warm up step, achieved this goal. On the warm up level, removed from the action, she was able to view the system from a different vantage point, which assisted her to isolate particular aspects that were affecting her. The protagonist was able to gather her resources, develop her capacity to observe and choose, notice the cause of her reactivity and distinguish between that and adrenalin driven interaction. With this new perspective, she was able to develop the idea that she had a choice about what she warmed up to, that it was possible for her to be a healthy functioning person and to be lovingly companioned and resourced as she faced into distressing parenting situations. Having developed a readiness for action, the protagonist then stepped spontaneously from the warm up step, the level of conception and growth, onto the action level of the stage which, according to Moreno, relates to action and completion.

The Balcony

The balcony is the fourth level of Moreno's psychodrama stage, the level of messiahs and heroes. Standing on the balcony, above the three other levels,

the protagonist can experience expansion, the universe, life beyond the ordinary, and gain a new perspective. The use of the balcony is illustrated below with Jane, a member of the parenting group.

Jane explains that she wants to become a calmer mother and stop screaming at her five children when they are fighting. Her husband works long hours and her confidence tends to evaporate under the weight of lone parenting. She describes moments when she feels herself becoming ineffective and withdrawn from her children, 'smaller and smaller as a person'. We set out one such scene, in which a conflict is occurring between the children in the kitchen at dinner time. We are working in a small venue and I remark to Jane that the stage area is limited. She comments that this small space is relevant to the situation because her kitchen seems very cramped when she is trying to prepare dinner and her five children are involved in a conflict. In the scene, Jane is coping by concentrating on peeling the potatoes rather than relating directly to her children. I ask her to rate herself on a tension scale, where ten is the highest indicator of anger or distress. She says she is on eight, 'heading towards ten'.

I make an assessment that Jane could benefit from an experience of expansion to increase her effectiveness as a mother. When we take on larger than life roles, Superman or a heavenly creature, we free ourselves up and warm up to a wider range of functioning than we imagine is available to us as mere humans. I therefore direct Jane to stand on a chair, in Morenian terms the balcony level of the psychodrama stage, and take up the role of someone larger than life. I hope that this level of 'super-human being' will assist Jane to gain a new view of her parenting abilities. She steps up onto the balcony and spreads her arms like the wings of an angel.

Director: *You look like an angel.*

Jane: (smiling) *Oh yeah.*

I interview Jane the angel to assist her to warm up to feeling super human and having a 'heavenly view' from the balcony regarding Jane down below in the kitchen. I direct the angel to address the auxiliary enacting that role, and the following interaction develops through role reversal.

Jane as angel: (taking a big breath and looking down) *Jane, hello.*

Jane: Looks up at the angel.

Jane as angel: *Take a breath. You are not alone. I am here. You can do this.*

Jane: (taking a breath) *I feel so alone and hopeless with my children.*

Jane as angel: *I am here. You can do this.*

Jane: *I like you being there. What can I do?*

Jane as angel: *Start with breathing...*

In the sharing, women identify their own feelings of powerlessness when

their children are fighting. Many of them warm up to imagining a superhero who swoops in at dinner time and encourages them to keep 'being the parent'. Superman is a favourite. In a subsequent group session, Jane reports that she has been experimenting with stepping up onto a chair and looking down 'from the balcony' when her children are fighting. She says that this gives her immediate distance and from that position, she is able to remind herself to breathe. She notices a reduction in tension and reactivity and is able to centre herself, which allows her to take a more objective look at the situation and generate more ideas about a calm intervention. She is having some success with these interventions and feels more satisfied as the mature adult in the family.

The balcony is the level of messiahs and heroes and I am delighted that its use in the enactment produced a 'super-individual', in this case in the form of an angel. Looking down on the scene, the protagonist was elevated from her ordinary life and liberated from feeling small and powerless. In this enactment and subsequently, her super-individual helps her to focus on the whole system and begin to see possibilities, which in turn assists her to become more expanded, engaged and confident. She is able to gain a different view of herself and feel more capable as a person and as a mother. Standing on the balcony, the fourth level of the Morenian stage, a person is able to expand, experience the universe, life beyond the ordinary, and gain a new perspective on their life.

Conclusion

Many psychodrama practitioners and group leaders do not have the luxury of an actual psychodrama stage. However, we can produce an enlivening experience for psychodrama participants by defining the available space as closely as possible to Moreno's original design for the psychodrama stage with its four levels, the audience, the warm-up step, the action space and the balcony, which mirror the stages of a protagonist's warming up process. As I have written this paper, I have become increasingly aware of the usefulness of holding this design in mind. The director is influenced by their understanding of the way in which Moreno used the psychodrama stage to bring to life the many dimensions of a person's life, often not visible or explored in everyday living. Meanwhile, an appreciation of the stage as an instrument of change requires a willingness to be experimental, to improvise resources at hand, to create various levels and dimensions of the stage, and to play with the use of space, height and depth and observe the effect. The stage that we create enhances our spontaneity as directors and warms up the protagonist, auxiliaries and audience to the work. We can make the most of action cues, work with increasing warm up and notice the protagonist's readiness to move from the audience, to the warm up step, to centre stage. With this awareness, a director embraces not only the design of the

psychodrama stage but also the design of psychodrama as a dramatic method that can assist people to become the creators of their own lives.

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Cushla Clark has been passionate about the psychodrama method for 20 years. She is inspired by Moreno's psychodrama stage and the way in which it can enhance the therapeutic experience, which she focused on in her AANZPA thesis, *Liberation via The Stage*. Cushla is a psychodramatist living a peaceful country life north of Auckland where she loves baking, tending to her many heritage roses, swimming at the beautiful local beaches, and leading psychodrama groups for personal development.