

# Psychodrama in the Post Modern World

by Ian McKissack

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Occasionally, at workshops, I hear a prediction that Psychodrama may fade away, as those who have had direct contact with Beacon leave the active scene. More often, a suggestion is that the method will become rigid – a travesty of Moreno's vision – without the transmitted live inspiration of Jacob and Zerka. There would be some basis for this gloom if the developing world view were to be similar to that of recent decades. Psychodramatic method and the derived system of role analysis have not made substantial inroads into the relevant Social Sciences of Psychology and Sociology. 'Moreno' and 'Psychodrama' appear in the index of many mainstream texts, and the comments in the text may be very respectful, as if the author had glimpsed but not comprehended an enrichment of life and learning. Yet that it is where it stops. And this is not surprising. The concepts of these texts have to be fully available to the intellect alone if they are to become an accepted part of developing scientific, 'rigorous', thought. As we

know, the value and validity of the Psychodramatic method requires experience *as part of the process* to know the process. 'Knowing', in experiential learning is a wider concept that it is for the objective scientist. For us, to know, is to understand through thinking and feeling and acting.

My optimism for the future of the Psychodramatic method is that the system of objective knowledge, based on a belief in absolute truth, which could not digest Moreno's intuition is itself being displaced. The new view from the bridge to the future is of an everchanging kaleidoscope of truths, not discovered by our intellects, but created by our interaction with the physical world, other persons, and the environment of ideas we live in. Reality is now seen to be socially constructed, and in a continuous process of re-construction. This emphasis on process is very familiar to us. Even so, the belief in an objective world gradually being uncovered, beneath the everyday world, still exists for most of us. The

essence of Post Modernism for me is that the everyday world *is* the world and we make it. This isn't too difficult to grasp in its most obvious area, the social environment, which is clearly created by the interaction between people, particularly linguistic encounters. The physical environment is less easily seen as socially constructed. There appears to be a given quality of firmness and relative permanence. Yet, modern physics has progressively taken us down a weird labyrinth searching for the ultimate nature of matter, and finding answers far removed from our commonplace perceptions. So that even physical reality turns out to be constructed out of an interaction between our sensory limitations and whatever might be there.

The implications which follow from this are many and varied. Feminists, for instance, have shown that the socially constructed reality we have lived in has been constructed for men, deliberately or unconsciously, by mainly men, and has included definitions of not just what women should do, but also who they are. Traditional femininity is not an attribute of women, it is a construction by men. As a consequence of the feminist revolution against colonization by men, much of the most acute and persuasive thinking using Post Modern concepts has been done by women. While there is part of the women's movement which looks back to earlier constructions of reality which assigned equal power to women, the most exciting contributions show that women can now construct their own realities. Gender attributes are a matter of choice, not fact. The emphasis on changing language habits by polemic women writers is a recognition of the importance linguistic encounters have in forming and maintaining social

constructions of reality. It is now up to men to construct a new reality for themselves that can co-exist and cooperate with the new reality of women.

Perhaps some of the clearest examples of social construction come from advertising and politics. Both sources invite us to enter their world. Toyota is most explicit, "Welcome to our world". Mazda strikes a post modern chord, "The excitement continues". George Bush coaxes Americans to believe in their imperial success; Dan Quayle reminds them of the joys of the reality constructed by Norman Rockwell – a homespun version of the American Dream –. The implication is that if you buy the product, vote for that politician, you have gained the right to enter the reality portrayed, and you will rightfully belong there.

The central area where Post Modern concepts are critical is in beliefs and values about the meaning and conduct of our lives. The reality in which we lead our lives is constructed by us, stepping outside of that personal world is through entering a more inclusive but still constructed world. Art, science, and theology, are all subject to this limitation; they are constructed processes of knowing. There may well be the absolute basis of all things the scientist seeks to pin down; there may well be the other dimension the theologian and the pilgrim aspire to understand. But we can never do more than create our own metaphors, models, theories, dogmas. They remain *our* realities. The unknown is the unknown. Now this is profoundly unsettling for those who search for certainty, and tremendously exciting for those who would create dreams. Beliefs and values have to be constructed by ourselves, in interaction with other selves, but not subservient

to them. The realities constructed by others may be impressive, moving, passionate; may resonate universally. Yet they remain constructions; they can be chosen, there is no moral imperative, no divine seal of approval to seek.

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“Where has Psychodrama gone?” you may be asking. To borrow a metaphor, there may only be one set of footsteps in the sand, but I have been carrying Psychodrama faithfully through the preceding paragraphs. *The Post Modern view not only frees us to construct, create our reality, it also insists that we accept the responsibility for the fact that we are doing this throughout our lives.* Sometimes we may give away that responsibility to Gods and gurus, but even the most devout will re-write some of the small print in the process of receiving dogma. If we are to accept the responsibility of being reality creators, we will need to be trained out of obedience and into creativity. What better setting than Moreno’s theatre of spontaneity? The essence of his vision was to meet life creatively; to be ready for the unexpected. Even Moreno may not have foreseen the extent that unpredictability would reach in a post modern world where the side effects of technology threaten to overwhelm us, and the

old certainties fade. If Psychodrama is to play a role in the development of the Post Modern era, we will need to continue reducing the perception of the method as being primarily therapeutic, and stress its educative role. In our development as trainees or practitioners, we are already learning not to impose our truth or the current social consensus, but rather to produce enactments which are concretizations of the protagonists construction of reality, and resolutions which move it forward in creative ways. The cultural conserve, which represents the belief in a fixed, objective reality, is to be replaced by the ability to create, and act in, a surplus reality which may become a new constructed reality. The story of our life is not fixed, we can rewrite it; focus on the heroic and not the dysfunctional. To live in our new story we will have to learn some new roles, and the consequent responses of the auxiliaries in our lives will be part of the changing plot.

If you have felt that much of the foregoing is highly intellectual, try a hard core Post Modern text. Its like trying to fight your way through a tropical undergrowth of convoluted and exotic concepts. Post Modernism may have been developed, commented on, even obscured, by individuals, but it is not just a new form of cognitive masturbation. The realisation that reality is constructed has been accelerated in this century by a complex of feeling, action, and reflection in those oppressed by the allegedly objective reality of the oppressors; the patriarchs, the colonisers, the exploiters. It has arisen in the life experience of slaves of the industrial revolution, women, minorities, dispossessed indigenous peoples. Psychodrama is about extending that life experience, stepping outside it, knowing it,

constructing a new personal reality. I think Psychodrama has a great opportunity to produce the future through its protagonists.

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