

Generating a Somatic Perspective in the Psychodramatic Enactment

by Hilde Knottenbelt

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'The body is the physical aspect of the personality and movement is the personality made visible.' (Mary Starks Whitehouse, 1999, p. 52)

As human beings we inhabit our bodies in habitual ways. We have our particular way of doing and being in our bodies. The way we use and inhabit our bodies is related to our personal history, our personality, our thinking and feeling life, the recurrent work situations we find ourselves in and the idiosyncratic and cultural ways in which we interpret and engage with the world. Also, we are bipeds living within the earth's gravitational pull. Our bodies are at the interface between the external environment, our spiritual life and our psyche.

In a psychodramatic enactment we have an opportunity to witness and observe the body in action. Generating a somatic perspective implies the application of a body-focused approach within the wider theoretical framework of the

psychodramatic method. How can we generate a perspective that enables us to produce a psychodrama in such a way that the (often unconscious) body knowing is brought out through the dramatic enactment? This article is intended as a contribution to developing this body of knowledge. In it I draw on my experience as a psychodramatist, voice teacher and shiatsu practitioner and teacher, and make reference to other theoretical frameworks including the Alexander Technique and Somatic Psychology.

As psychodramatists we work more or less consciously with the manifestations of the physical body. We train ourselves to observe changes in the physical body and to notice an emerging role via subtle changes in breath and body tone. We understand the notion of physical starters

in the ability to warm up to a role. We are attuned to bodies acting in physical space and time, and make meaning of the physical distances between objects. We use surplus reality to weave these things into the fabric of the drama. We have varying degrees of awareness of our own bodies as we run and participate in groups.

The psychodramatic method is a systemic one. A systemic approach focuses on relationships and interdependence and does not reduce elements within the system to smaller parts (Capra, 1983, p. 286). As we develop awareness of the body in the psychodramatic enactment, we can usefully regard the body as an energetic system in itself with particular structures and functions. At the same time we can also perceive the body as located in a psychic, socio-cultural matrix.

The body carries an imprint of what the conscious mind no longer registers. This is sometimes called body memory or knowing. Body knowing necessarily includes life experiences for which there may be no words (preverbal) or a failure/inadequacy of words (when something is unspeakable). It can be expressed within the body through over-development of certain muscle groups and underdevelopment of others. It may be expressed through particular breathing patterns. In a psychodramatic enactment, the body is located in a time, space and context. These stimulate the memory and bring to the surface feelings/thoughts/roles that might not be available were the body static. How then, do we work with what the body is expressing, even if we don't understand it and even if it doesn't yet have a voice, as such? Furthermore, what are the assumptions underlying the way we perceive the body?

CONCEPTUALISING THE BODY

Spontaneity and the Body

Spontaneity is one of the cornerstones of the psychodramatic method. It includes, amongst other things, the notion of an adequate response, a readiness for action and the ability to meet the demands of the moment in a fresh way. If we think about this in terms of the body we might conceive of it as the ability to free ourselves from the domination of fixed habits, i.e. conserved ways of moving and using our bodies. It is my belief that if we don't 'get this' on the level of the body, we are missing an important element in enlivening/invigorating the conserved parts of ourselves, and developing awareness of the unconscious patternings that influence our way of being in the world.

Significant changes in the body do occur in a psychodramatic enactment. A person stands taller and firmer as they become more unified in themselves. Their breathing is easier and their body tone significantly improved. The collapsed chest opens and the abdominal muscles lengthen and widen. The lower and upper body look all of a piece. However, we are also likely at a later time to revert in our postural patterns to old, familiar habits that are wedded with our personality (and role repertoire). It is useful to have a map, a way of charting and being able to perceive these habits.

The Alexander Technique offers such a framework. It was developed by F.-M. Alexander, an actor who suffered from vocal strain. In the process of seeking a cure he became interested in how he used his body as he spoke. De Alcanatara (1997, p.13) quotes Alexander: *'Talk about a man's individuality and character: it's the way he uses himself'*.

The Alexander Technique enables a person to become familiar with their repertoire of posture and habit and of the associated emotional patterns. It involves the experience of gradually freeing oneself from the domination of fixed habits (Gelb, 1983, p. 1). Gelb (p. 31) quotes Aldous Huxley on Alexander's work: *'If you teach an individual first to be aware of his physical organism and then to use it as it was meant to be used, you can often change his entire attitude to life and cure his neurotic tendencies.'*

While it is not within the scope of this article to describe this technique in any depth, the framework does give us some pointers to perceiving the body in action which are useful for the psychodramatist. I have woven them into the following considerations.

Given that we move and use our bodies in habituated ways, can we look at a person/protagonist/director and perceive at least some of these habits? Might we be able to direct people towards more neutral use of the body and out of that encourage new ways of moving and breathing? From a place of readiness for action in the body, a readiness to respond adequately, with the appropriate amount of physical activity for the task: there is the possibility for spontaneous action, for a new physical response to an old situation, for the embodiment of a new role. Can we, by drawing attention to the spine *and* the relationship between the head, neck and back, direct a protagonist to new ways of moving/experiencing/sensing?

Practice Perceiving:

- Notice the relationship between the head/neck/back. Is there a sense of unity of movement of the whole? Does the head sit on top of the spine? Is it pushed forward off the top of the spine? Is the lower back pulled in? Is the chest collapsed? Pulled down? Are the hips free? Is the breath easy? held? Is there a sense of length in the spine? Is there a tightening at the base of the skull?

Preverbal Experience, Somatic Roles and the Emerging Stage of the Double

A person at a residential voice workshop is setting out on the stage her warm-up to three days of vocal improvisation and story singing. She lies down on her back, and makes gurgling, baby sounds. She chooses someone to be her in the bassinette. The group member lies down beside her and takes up the role of her double. The protagonist is enjoying her body and its sensations and is absorbed in the discovery of the sounds she is making. They lie there together gurgling, making farting sounds with their lips, until the spell is broken by another group member laughing and commenting.

Moreno conceived of the psychosomatic role as a preverbal configuration in which the infant's bodily sensations and immediate physical needs are expressed. These roles may be accompanied by/associated with sounds, including sucking sounds, and cries rather than words. In very early development, these roles emerge out of the 'universal matrix of identity' in which it is hypothesised that the infant does not yet recognise 'the other' as separate, the world is simply an extension of itself. It is in this state that Moreno (1953, p. 245) says the

double is activated for the first time. The double in a psychodrama is a person who perceptually, intellectually, emotionally and physically assumes the same identity as the protagonist (Hollander, 1979). Moreno hypothesises the necessity for unity and integration, associated with the phase of the double, before the process of differentiation is initiated.

Let us consider the implications this has for a somatic perspective. As an auxiliary double, you inhabit the same gestural field as the protagonist. Your body is an immediate and direct expression of their life/your life. It directly informs you about the experience of the protagonist. Your capacity to double is affected by the spontaneity level in your own body, and the degree to which you can free yourself of your own postural and gestural habits.

The Body and the Stage of the Mirror

The stage of the mirror commences as the individual starts to become aware of itself as a separate entity with a body and impulses of its own. Any behaviour by others to enhance that person's awareness of their physical body, impulses, emotions and feelings will further autonomous development (Clayton, 1991, p. 16).

A person attending a voice workshop expresses her desire to sing soulfully. As she sings, her voice reaches out into the space around her, and just as soon it begins to retreat. Her mouth narrows, her shoulders hunch forward and the tone retreats, thins and loses its colour and ease, even as she continues singing. Subsequently, with mirroring of her physical body, she recognises the desire to be heard and the concurrent fear of being heard.

In the same way that Moreno hypothesises that the person emerges out of the role/universal matrix, Romanyshyn (1998) suggests the existence of archetypal gestural fields out of which the individual emerges and grows. The gesture, says Romanyshyn, is the portal through which each of us enters into the mystery of the other. He (1998, p. 46) describes English Actor Anthony Hopkins in the moment he understands the character of Picasso. *'It was in the movement of walking in a certain way, of going down a staircase, and in the gestures of the arms and trunk and legs which accompany such a movement, that Picasso was born in him. By waiting for the gestures, by making oneself a vehicle to be impregnated by the other, the character was/is born.'*

As we mirror another person in a drama, we are mirroring not only the physical, verbal expression, but a whole world of meaning, which can be captured in the tilt of a head or the holding out of a hand. Within the psychodrama, mirroring can occur both through the mirroring technique and through role reversal.

Role Playing and Role Reversal.

Roles emerge in relationship in response to other people, objects, memories and in a context. Our thinking and feeling life is intimately connected to the way we use our bodies and the role we are playing in a given moment. As directors, when we interview for role in a drama, we are amongst other things warming the protagonist up to the gestural field of the other. We might do this by having the protagonist tune in to the clothes they are wearing, their walk, and their senses.

When we role reverse we are acting a role we may or may not have acted in our own lives. We have a physical/bodily experience of the other.

The protagonist or auxiliary who role reverses, and maintains the same physical tone throughout, is unlikely to experience the other in great depth. On the other hand, as the protagonist/auxiliary reverses roles she may look different and act in a physically unhabituated manner. This can be associated with spontaneous, surprising ways of thinking. In the case of the auxiliary, it assists them to be less focused on remembering and repeating content, and more able to resource their knowing from their body.

Practice Perceiving:

- Is the auxiliary/protagonist embodying the role? entering the gestural/physical field of the other or do they still look like themselves? What coaching might be necessary?

PRODUCING THE BODY

Concretisation of the Physical

A director asks a protagonist to set out her vision of herself in five years time. She chooses an auxiliary to be herself and puts her in the middle of the stage. The protagonist then bites her lip. The director instructs her to choose someone to be her biting her lip, and to put that on the stage in relation to her vision of herself in five years time.

At the moment that the protagonist bites her lip, something extra is emerging in her. It is not at all clear what that is, and the protagonist is unaware that she has been biting her lip. In concretising the lip-biter, the protagonist becomes conscious of her self-doubt. The director then asks the protagonist to set out all the things that would stop her realising her vision.

From this intervention, the reactive forces are concretised. The vision is thereby anchored in a greater appreciation of what is required to bring it about. It is taken out of the realm of idealisation. The director is not concerned with trying to understand the meaning of the lip-biting, but is working as a producer, and in doing so, the story tells/reveals itself.

As psychodrama directors, we can generate hypotheses based on the gestural expression of the protagonist, which can be tested and either built on or dropped altogether if they prove irrelevant. At times we may not generate a hypothesis so much, as recognise every expression of the body as significant communication. We can train ourselves to notice this, and develop the ability to produce it in a number of ways.

Practice Perceiving:

- When the protagonist is conflicted, how is this manifesting in their physical body? This might look like a gesture that lacks flow or unity of movement. It may be that the gesture is dissonant with the verbal expression, and may seem truncated or discontinuous, as if the protagonist were moving in one direction, and at the same time held back. This mix of motivating and reactive forces creates a certain tension in the body. Where do you imagine the tension is located?

Bodily Sensations in the Psychodramatic Enactment

Somatic psychotherapist Barbara Holifield (1998, p. 69) describes her work with a client who suffered trauma in her early life through physical, sexual and emotional abuse. She outlines some physical manifestations which have emerged in Dolores as part of a

pattern of dissociation from her body. These include withdrawal of muscular tone and feeling from the periphery of her body, by chronic tightening inside or by loss of tone in intrinsic muscles (collapse), or by tightening outer musculature in order to numb against the overwhelming energy of terror and rage. Further she notes that, whatever the physical manifestation, attuning to bodily-felt experience can facilitate bringing cohesion to shattered states of self.

In the course of a psychodrama, a protagonist might say: 'I feel heavy; my head hurts; I feel sick; there's pressure in my chest; my arms are tingling; I feel weak at the knees; my heart is pounding; or I feel numb. These are somatic responses to the emerging drama. Naturally, any intervention would be influenced by the stage of the drama. But let's consider what techniques of surplus reality might be appropriate in order to bring out the latent content? Perhaps the following suggestions are a good place to start:

I feel heavy:

Act that, sculpt that, show us how heavy you feel.

There's pressure in my chest:

Choose someone from the group to be the pressure in your chest.

My arms are tingling:

Notice your legs, your torso etc. Are you aware of other sensations?

I feel numb:

Tune in to your bodily experience. Are you numb all over? Or are particular parts of you numb? Choose someone to be you who is feeling numb.

Maximisation

When we use maximisation, we are assisting the protagonist to tune in to their body in a particular moment, to warm up further, and perhaps to become more aware of their warm-up. In the process of extending the gesture/non verbal expression, there is the possibility that its meaning will be revealed through the body and that its meaning can be vocalised, if not verbalised. ('Put words/a sound to what you're doing.' / 'Be aware of your experience as you do this.' / 'Be aware of your body as you do this, your whole body.' / 'Notice what you're thinking and feeling.' / 'Notice where you're tight and where you are loose.')

A detailed registering of the felt (thinking, feeling, experiencing, sensing) body is in some instances a necessary precursor to bridge the gap between something that is unconscious to something that is conscious.

Touch

Being a teacher and practitioner of shiatsu, I am particularly interested in what is communicated, what is received, what one can learn about the other through touch. Touch is an essential part of our experience of being human and inhabiting our physical bodies. The way we are touched and held as infants is an important factor in our development and our experience of our bodies and our sense of self.

A group member in a shiatsu weekend, when asked to bring out a significant experience of touch in her life, described how at primary school, she got excited when ever the mothers came to check the children's head for lice. She longed to have them touch her head as they scanned her scalp for lice. The memory was both painful, because of the absence of touch it implied in her family of

origin, and also somehow exquisite, for the secret stolen-ness of a need met.

Touch in the psychodramatic enactment can be initiated by the protagonist, as she writes and enacts her script. It may also come about as a strategic or therapeutic intervention during the drama. For instance, a director says to the protagonist: show us how you feel in relation to your sister. How close are you in this moment? The protagonist stands alongside her sister, their shoulders touching companionably.

In another situation, a director asks a protagonist to set out his vision of applying the psychodramatic method in his work. This is Larry's first experience with psychodrama. He is looking for a modality that will enliven his current practice with clients in a one-to-one setting. He sets out his consulting room where he is interviewing a client. The 'new modality' is concretised with the use of an auxiliary. It stands behind Larry, with its hands on his shoulders. During a role reversal the protagonist, acting as the New Modality, is having difficulty warming up and doesn't put his hands on Larry's shoulders. The director vigorously coaches him to 'Make Contact!' This is subsequently enacted. While in itself a small intervention, the making of physical contact immediately strengthens the warm-up of the New Modality to its own purpose, as well as strengthening the relationship between the protagonist and the New Modality. Larry is able to warm up to working with the client in a unified way.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This is essentially an investigative paper intended to stimulate further thought in this area. I have explored the notion of spontaneity applied to the body; the recognition of a world of meaning contained within a gesture; the way we use our bodies; the body as the physical aspect of the personality; and the significance of touch. These are all aspects of generating a somatic perspective in the psychodramatic enactment.

Knowing that the body is a vital resource and a way of getting in touch with one's experiencing, feeling and thinking, we might sense more deeply just what we are bringing about on the level of the body during a psychodramatic enactment. We may also be able to work more actively using psychodramatic techniques, to give the body a stronger, clearer voice within the enactment.

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