

Psychodrama Roles: Creating a New Culture

by John Woodcock

John began a career in psychodrama in 1974 (as John Radecki), graduated in Perth in 1978 as a Sociodramatist and began working with community groups. His life took a fateful turn in 1979, when he left for the USA supposedly for a holiday and realised that he would not be going back to Australia. He joined the Jungian community and worked as a therapist, teacher and workshop facilitator in different parts of the USA. His return to Sydney this year was heralded in good Jungian fashion by a dream. In this article he brings his insight into the use of imagination to an analysis of a psychodrama.

Introduction

In this essay, I describe a psychodrama in which the protagonist grappled with her own version of what I call a cultural catastrophe. Before we enter her drama I want to say a few words about this catastrophe in order to give her drama and its resolution an appropriate cultural and historical context.

Since the Scientific Revolution, our Western culture has systematically 'extracted' the human imagination from its epistemology. For example, the qualities of nature - her beauty, roughness, colours, fragrances etc. were seen as "subjective" i.e. originating in the observer's subjective imagination. Science was interested in naming and measuring those aspects that belonged only to the object: quantities. The Romantic movement emerged as a counter to this extraction process which left us with a

knowledge of 'dead' nature. Romantic poets were enchanted with the beauty and the reality of the imagination.

Although the beauty and reality of the imagination flowered in great works of art, its truth or its value as a way of knowing the world slipped into obscurity under the onslaught of the scientific method which has now become the predominant world view. In this way the grand attempt of the Romantics to restore the imagination to our culture has largely failed.

There are some who have spoken on behalf of the reality and truth of the imagination: Blake, Coleridge, Goethe, Steiner, Jung, Barfield, Corbin and AE (a prominent Irish poet) and of course, Moreno, to name a few pioneers. Today many more are taking up their work and extending it into various fields. The key idea shared by these 'exponents of the imagination' is

that of its objective reality and its truth. What is meant by the *objective* imagination is that its figures or forms do not originate in their essence in our subjective experiences, i.e. our personal histories. We do not *introject* them from outside. The imagination is not created that way. Rather, the idea of the objective imagination seeks to give ontological primacy to its figures. It could be expressed this way: first the imagination, then the world. The imagination's truth expresses the fact that imagination is a valid way of knowing the world. In fact it was the *only way* of knowing prior to the emergence of science.

The two ways of knowing may be distinguished this way: Science's method teaches knowledge of a world separate from the observer and therefore without life. Imagination's way is a way achieved through *becoming the other* thereby collapsing the distance between observer and object. The theory of the imagination shows that this latter way is the only way to understanding the *nature* of the other, distinguished from understanding how it works mechanically. The objective imagination is *the* way to an experience of the world-as-other.

These are the two central ideas that I am extending into the theory of psychodrama. In this article I will discuss the terrible suffering that is occurring to many people as the objective imagination continues to be systematically eliminated from all 'official discourse' concerning knowledge of any kind. Suffering occurs because the objective imagination is our life, our liveliness, our spontaneity and our creativity! We may know more about dead things through science but we ourselves are dying from this knowledge. A being that is alive physically but not imaginally is a zombie, as in Frankenstein's monster, a creation of science.

Protagonists who sense that their life force is too diminished by the restrictions of their social atom sometimes seek to connect with the life of the imagination through the expression of inner figures. In so doing they are beginning to work on behalf of our culture in its current movement towards catastrophe. People such as Jane, the protagonist in my article are sensing that they need something more than what the prescriptions of society offer on the question of being fully human. Through their suffering they may turn within to the objective imagination, seeking to reunite with its life-giving waters by *becoming* one or more of its figures. Then the work of integration begins, as I show in Jane's case. This work involves social atom repair in which the inevitable conflict between the newly released energies of life and the 'cultural conserves' is borne by the individual often with no help from her community. However any advance that is made in this work is a pioneering work and is in effect a contribution to a new culture. This new culture is one in which the objective imagination is once again given a central place in human discourse and activity. In this way our impending catastrophe may simply mean a *catastrophe of birth*.

The Psychodrama of "Jane"

I recently participated as an auxiliary in a psychodrama for a protagonist who I will call Jane. She was struggling to understand her "unreasonable" jealous reactions to other women who, for example, talked with her husband at parties. As we re-created a scene to explore her roles, she became nervous and shy. She told the director that she needed to show herself as a jealous wife but felt awkward about doing so. She told us that she could only adequately show the extent of her jealousy if she expressed the image of a spear

going through her heart, which of course she was encouraged to do. Jane lay down on the floor with a mixture of self-consciousness and intent and began to writhe and scream as if a spear had indeed been thrust through her heart. While this dramatic moment was going on she also had an awkward smile as if she could not quite take herself seriously and was embarrassed at what we might possibly be thinking about her “exaggerations”. She acted as if this figure were simultaneously an aspect of herself to be taken utterly seriously and a form of play-acting that risks ridicule from others.

I was then asked to play the figure of speared victim. During my enactment I was very careful to demonstrate the conflict that Jane showed which involved both a cruel mocking judgment, plus a determination to display the depth of hurt experienced inherent in the figure of the speared victim. I then took a risk as auxiliary to develop the conflict more fully. I stopped laughing nervously and moved more fully into the figure of speared victim, even telling her husband (Jane-as-husband) to stop laughing at me (as the speared, writhing victim). The drama seemed to deepen considerably and Jane became more willing to reveal more such figures that seemed on the surface to be exaggerated, dramatic as in an opera, and less and less reducible to the social roles in her system. The psychodrama released in her a system of strange figures that carried its own rules of conduct, its own morality and logic.

As we explored these figures, several aspects of the psychodrama’s benefit to the protagonist became clear to me:

i) the drama would have gone nowhere if these strange figures had not been given full expression;

- ii) the protagonist had a large act hunger to enact these figures;
- iii) her difficulty in the stated issue, that of “unreasonable jealousy towards other women” lay in her inability to find a place in her ordinary life for these keenly felt, but exaggerated figures;
- iv) these figures were simply not understood by her or those in her social atom. Instead they were evaluated as being “make believe” or “not real”. She would even run the risk of being called hysterical; and
- v) when these unwanted figures were allowed to live fully through her by trusting the method of psychodrama, she became enlivened and her enthusiasm increased. Surprisingly perhaps, the original issue of jealousy seemed to melt away. She concluded the drama by re-connecting with her husband in a new way, through the expanded psychodramatic roles of empowered self acceptor and loving companion.

The Psychodramatic Role

Jane’s ordinary life was conflicted and impoverished because her social atom, composed of her personal, social and cultural roles did not include the expression of inner figures that do not seem to find their origin in the family system or indeed in any aspect of Jane’s personal history. These figures that Jane needed to express through an act hunger and which were denied expression seem to be the same kind of “role description” that Max Clayton (1994) points to:

Other role descriptions portray more of the individuality of a person and touch their experiencing centre in such a way that their interest is greatly aroused. Role descriptions

that accurately pinpoint the experience and aspirations of a person naturally enhance the conscious development of roles that are unique to them. Such roles may be termed psychodramatic. (p.125)

In the article that contains this quote, Clayton refers to an example in which someone is described as a *Marco Polo*. Such a role description can have the effect of developing enthusiasm for adventure, or exploring new uncharted territories. As the person enacts this role in life she can develop many new roles in life that are *unique* in the sense that they are fueled by the energies of the *Marco Polo* figure while at the same time being shaped by actual experience in the world. I believe that Clayton and indeed Moreno describe these roles enacted within the social atom as psychodramatic roles.

Jane's progress through her psychodrama began with her presentation of an impoverished social atom: one in which her roles were socially prescribed only. They were not fueled by the energies of her own being and she felt stifled in her expression of her inner life. She satisfied her act hunger by becoming the figure of the *rejected and speared victim*, thus releasing its energies into her conscious life. She felt enlivened and was then able to return to her social atom, enhancing her psychodramatic roles with those energies. She was able to find an appropriate way to express the *energies* of the *rejected speared victim* through more developed psychodramatic roles acceptable to her social atom – the roles of *empowered self acceptor* and *loving companion*.

A Cultural Catastrophe

Jane's conflict is one instance of a cultural catastrophe that is a consequence of a two-fold push in our society. Firstly, the reality of role descriptions (what I call "figures") such as *Marco Polo, rejected speared victim* is being systematically destroyed. I will call this irreducible reality the *objective imagination*, in the tradition of depth psychology. It is irreducible in the sense that it is not formed by internalized experiences of the outer world. It comes with us into this world. "It" is us! The objective imagination is the source of our creativity, which has led to advances in culture and as well, some horrors being loosed on the world (such as the nuclear bomb). Yet, in modern culture, the objective imagination is regarded only as a place for entertaining ourselves (Disneyland style). It is not regarded as having much to do with knowing the world or with being known by others. The objective imagination is no longer felt to have anything to do with our *being* or *the world's being*. We currently have no educational system that explores the objective imagination as a vehicle of truth.

Secondly, the range of socially sanctioned roles within our social atoms is being narrowed by fear to the point of stifling any individual expression at all. For example, within the workplace, there are terrible fears that stepping outside prescribed role expectations will expose us to civil or even criminal action.

The eradication of the objective imagination as a category of human experience is nothing less than an attack on our being. We can no longer bring our imagination into our personal and social life for fear of reprisal. This loss is catastrophic. In a sense, Jane is fortunate in that she still *suffered* from the loss, i.e. she could intuit that something was

missing from her social atom, something that needs fullness of expression within her social atom but which was inhibited through our current prejudice against the imagination. The energies of her being as contained in her inner figures of the imagination could not live through her social atom and she hungered for their expression. Her jealousy towards her husband was at least partially resolved by having the courage to bring the goodness, beauty and truth of her being into visibility. She achieved this by *becoming* a figure of her objective imagination, living it fully and then shaping its energies into an appropriate psychodramatic role.

Of course such figures seem exaggerated or magnified. The Romantics, who were the great modern discoverers of the imagination understood that some forms of being can only be expressed fully through the literary device of exaggeration. Such forms are big because we are big, far bigger than what society tells us, far bigger than the narrowly prescribed roles of our social and cultural atoms.

The Birth of a New Culture

Having given full expression to a few of her imaginal figures, Jane's "unreasonable jealousy" dissolved. It seems to me that this resolution is a natural consequence of discovering who we really are. Jane regained *vision*. However, regaining the vision of the beauty and magnitude of our being is just the beginning of healing. There is still the problem of how to bring our magnificence into the narrow spectrum of 'allowed behaviors' that constitute our modern society. In a psychodramatic enactment, this problem is often felt at first as a re-emergence of painful conflicts within the family of origin. I believe this happens because we carry the wound of our first failed attempts to bring

our "clouds of glory" into embodied life within our original family.

Jane's drama therefore took a turn into an early childhood scene in which she felt stifled in her self-expression within the family system. Through the method, she was able to make a new decision regarding that expression and a tremendous outward blast of her own life force occurred. I believe this was a critical point in her psychodrama. Her life force then entered her social atom invigorating the psychodramatic roles of empowered self acceptor and loving companion. She approached her husband in a new way, through her love for him and through the confidence her knowledge of that love gave her.

Jane's enactment and its resolution carry the seeds of a new culture, one in which imaginal reality is not split off from our ordinary lives but instead enlivens and restores meaning to our ordinary lives. Her drama shows the major aspects of the experience of participating in the birth of this new culture:

- i) Jane's social atom was impoverished and she was conflicted. She intuited that her present social roles were inadequate for the full expression of her being;
- ii) she suffered an unresolved act hunger for expression of her *imaginal being* into her ordinary life, through her psychodramatic roles, even though they are often 'dark' expressions, like jealousy;
- iii) she made a choice for her *being* – she opted for expression of her inner images (catharsis of abreaction); and

iv) she then faced the problem of integration – how to bring the fullness of her being, once discovered and accepted, into her social atom (catharsis of integration).

Jane's participation in these aspects contributes to the birth of a new culture. Our present modern culture is stifling 'symbolic expressions' in the name of political correctness. To take just one example, many workplaces forbid jokes because 'someone' might be offended. This cramps self-expression and many people like Jane are left with incomprehensible 'act hungers' for which there is no language, no means of expression except perhaps through dysfunctional or impoverished social roles. *Yet, which is the bigger force: the force of a repressive culture or the force of our being?*

The difficulty and opportunity here is that Jane cannot lean on our culture for possible solutions. There are none! Our culture is in a crisis due to the two-fold push I spoke of above. Protagonists like Jane will not likely find the role of warm welcomer in her social atom, waiting to greet her new found expanded self. Instead she will likely find the roles of judge, pathologizer or fearful withdrawer waiting for her. Since Jane cannot rely on modern culture to assist her, then any work she does, any small gain she makes becomes an original contribution to the forming of a new culture.

This new culture is one in which the objective imagination becomes the primary ontological category and also the focal point for a new ethic which states that individual being must be fostered, educated, for the sake of the world. Our uniqueness as expressed through our psychodramatic roles would be identified and loved by our culture. I say *for the sake of the world* because the expression of inner figures through

cultivated psychodramatic roles brings an *objective reality* which is essentially spiritual into the material world. Psychodramatic roles are the self-presentation of our being and our being is much greater than the personal domain. Our being interpenetrates with the being of the world. Our psychodramatic roles are therefore vehicles for embodying an aspect of the world's being. It may well be that the meaning of *our* being is to do just that – embody an aspect of the world's being!

Conclusion

When a protagonist discovers an act hunger - a desire to express un-lived life – several conflicts emerge which the psychodramatist should be aware of:

- i) A choice may be made to seek expression of one's being through role-playing one or more imaginal figures, thus releasing one's life force;
- ii) A decision may be made never to lose touch with that life force again, never to be minimized by the narrow prescriptions of society's roles. This new decision often has the consequence of breaking up the present social atom which cannot hold the newly discovered magnitude of being. Marriages break up; friendships come and go; new careers are launched or old ones destroyed. Sometimes suicide is contemplated when there seems to be no way of bringing one's fullness of being into one's current social atom. Within this "breakdown" lies the possibility of discovering a well spring of creativity as yet without form;
- iii) An attempt may be made to integrate one's creative energies into one's social atom. This attempt is often accompanied by much suffering but can lead to the

creation of a new cultural atom via artistic development or political or social action designed to expand and enrich the present role system in which we live.

I believe that any therapeutic method that invites a person to open up this cultural conflict within him or herself must do more than naively leave it to the person to come up with a solution. To do so is to place the burden of a culture onto the shoulders of a single individual. Many have been broken by such a burden. Practitioners of the method must have an appropriate understanding of the objective imagination as the source of our spontaneity and creativity. We must also have an appreciation of the magnitude and depth of the conflicts I addressed above and of the difficulty in finding a solution to the conflict. Within the field of psychodrama, there is a way to explore this conflict and to educate practitioners about it. I am of course referring to the theory and practice of sociodrama. This method is ideally suited to examining the interplay between psychodramatic roles and social roles in society. Sociodrama is an educational method that can aim at finding social and cultural solutions to a looming catastrophe.

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