

# Via Sponte

## The Art of Effective Auxiliary Work

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When a person approaches another and enters their experience, with lightness, immediacy and boldness, where they are not bothered by convention but caught up in a simple act of kindness, the world becomes a different world. Everything is brighter, the sky is bluer. In these moments the person becomes more observant and gets to know aspects of self that have been hitherto unknown. Experiencing the self is a holistic, numinous experience and it's these experiences that make it possible to keep generating more spontaneity and acts of kindness. Such experiences are unforgettable and they expand exponentially, creating change in the whole social system. Achieving these ecstatic, existential encounters happens only when we access our spontaneity.

As a cornerstone of psychodrama, spontaneity has particular meaning. Moreno defined spontaneity as the ability to respond in an adequate way to a new situation and described six forms of it as adequacy, warming up, vitality, originality, the ability to move between reality and fantasy and creativity (see Clayton, 1989:67). He saw our ability to act spontaneously as the essence of life from the moment of birth. The extent to which we are able to listen, to

experience ourselves in a moment and to act from that place of awareness, is the extent to which we are responsive and mobile, and able to experience a 'liquid flowing energy'.

### The Fundamental Capacities of the Auxiliary Ego

While accessing spontaneity is a responsibility for all participants in a psychodrama, entering the liquid flowing energy is a complex and multi-dimensional work that is the auxiliary ego's special domain. In Playback Theatre it is a fundamental capacity required of an actor, and so it is for all of us in our lives with each other. Developing the capacity to warm up to a spontaneous state again and again means having to open oneself up to everyone and everything. When that happens each person is willing to enter the unknown with others. And then, something else emerges.

The fundamental capacities required of an auxiliary ego develop from integration of a number of related and overlapping concepts, - wholeheartedness, spontaneity, 'spanda' and flow, freedom, connectedness, a willingness to unveil demons, the art of moving toward denouement and a focus on aesthetic production.

I examine each of these separately.

### **Wholeheartedness**

Wholeheartedness in the auxiliary requires that they bring all of who they are into the present moment. When an auxiliary acts wholeheartedly, their spontaneity increases and they are able to act with alacrity and purpose, listening to their heart and in synch with the energy of the protagonist. The protagonist is lit up by the subtle or large acts of the auxiliary, feeling that they are not alone in this journey. Auxiliaries remain alive to their own spontaneity throughout the drama, assisting the protagonist to keep warming up to an inner life and its expression in the here and now. Grotowski sees wholeheartedness as the actor's essential gift, containing the potential to transform a performance or a psychodrama (1975:99).

### **"I'm Giving You Life"**

*Four auxiliaries maximise a moment where the protagonist is imprisoned by chains of self loathing. Paradoxically he is also held by his life-embracing companion, whom he rejects. The protagonist has been fighting for some time when he reaches a catharsis of abreaction. He shouts many times, "I don't want to live." Acting wholeheartedly, the auxiliary produces a commitment to live equal to the protagonist's wish to die. As the companion, he holds the protagonist and says "I'm not giving up. I'm giving you life". At the same time, he grips the protagonist's hand and looks directly into his eyes. Everything about the auxiliary draws the protagonist out, lifting him up in response. The protagonist then lifts his head for the first time and experiences the unreserved commitment and love of his companion self, thus shifting his warm up to himself. After a time he walks around the room arm in arm with his companion self, expressing warmth towards him. As this catharsis of integration takes place, the protagonist looks taller and stronger. He begins to orientate himself towards the group openly and solidly, wholeheartedly ... he is lit up.*

This then is the aspiration of the auxiliary, to act wholeheartedly and congruently, where the eyes, ears and intellect are connected with the heart and body.

### **Spontaneity, Spanda and Flow**

Spontaneity is a mobile, flowing state. In Moreno's words, "*This is not something permanent, not set and rigid as written words or melodies are, but fluent, rising and falling, growing and fading like living acts and still different from life. It is this state of production, the essential principle of all creative experience*" (1973:44). The spontaneous actor warms up fully to this state and it falls away and grows again. Having confidence in this knowledge, actors can warm up repeatedly even when they experience loss of spontaneity. The spontaneous actor is interested in developing their ability to act adequately when confronted with the unforeseen, rather than conforming to a perfectionist view of the world.

Something larger than the present moment is occurring when spontaneity is present. This is what I liken to being in an altered state, a trance, or another plane, where one has an experience of flow. We are connecting with something that is "*fluent, rising and falling, growing and fading like living acts and still different from life*". It is a peak experience that I relate to as 'spanda', the divine throb or pulsation of the universe. Paul Muller-Ortega says of spanda "*[It is] the branching vibratory matrix, the web of pulsating life, resonant sound, or liquidly flowing energies that make up the field of human existence*" (in Singh, 1992:xix).

In the spontaneous state the auxiliary ego is thus 'liquidly flowing energy'. Auxiliaries experience themselves transcending the barriers of their own personality and merging with all life, where surprising acts and words emerge. Through this process, the protagonist's warm up to self is increased and the deeper truth of their experience enacted. Moreno suggests that the auxiliary actor must 'ad lib', and thus draw on experiences that are not ready-made but "*buried within them in an unformed state.*" The protagonist then experiences a flowingness of self that allows for surprise insights. They create another warm-up, take on other roles and counter roles, and begin to picture other possibilities for their lives. Max Clayton

describes the effects of effective auxiliary work in the group as *"Life begetting life. Spontaneity begets more spontaneity, and it keeps going, on and on and on and it doesn't stop, it doesn't stop"* (Clayton and Carter, 2004:69).

### **Stroking The Cat**

*It is a playback performance at an international conference. The storyteller tells of a moment when she is sitting on the floor in her sunny studio. A telephone rings interrupting her quiet reverie. The caller is from Mexico, informing her that her father has died. At the beginning of the enactment, as actor, I sit on the floor, relaxed and contently stroking an imaginary cat. At the end of the enactment, the teller says that she was actually stroking the cat at the time and was intrigued as to how I knew without being told.*

Moreno calls this tele in action. For me, this moment demonstrates the flow that springs from spontaneous and telic connection between the teller and the actor. It also indicates an ability to see and feel the next piece, ahead of its being embodied. Jonathan Fox quotes Anais Nin, *"Like a medium - you try to cross over into that part of you that's always there, but is only alive when you are playing"* (Fox, 1994:81). An auxiliary in psychodrama enters into a similar state of spontaneity and will enact roles sometimes previously thought impossible.

### **Freedom**

Moreno sees the purpose of therapeutic theatre as nothing less than that *"every true second time is the liberation from the first"* (1977:28). The implication for the auxiliary ego is to act from the self, expressing vitality through the vehicle of the protagonist's story, which must to some degree become their own story. Only when all auxiliaries in the drama play spontaneously is a true freedom experienced. Moreno says *"Every living figure denies and resolves itself through psychodrama. Life and psychodrama offset each other and go under in laughter. It is the final form of the theatre"* (1977:29).

To the degree that auxiliaries develop their spontaneity, there is freedom to act. The greater the willingness to step into new situations and enact new roles the more complex the cultural conserve becomes. In picture form, it becomes a patterned antique sari rather than a stiff new tea towel. The cultural conserve becomes a springboard from which an auxiliary may act in an unconstrained way, becoming mirror and model for others.

### **Thin Ice**

*The protagonist, Pamela, is working purposefully towards an encounter with a trainer. Previously in the drama she had been displaying curiosity, courage and playful spontaneity in her relationships with others. At the moment the trainer enters the room, Pamela's body begins to go slack and her face crumples into tears. The director, coming alongside the protagonist and placing his hand on her shoulder, says "You are a child on thin ice hearing the ice cracking. I see that you are temporarily awash with feeling and you've indicated that you want to face this person and stay in relationship with yourself and with others despite how difficult it is." In response, the protagonist takes hold of herself and continues the drama. Pamela consolidates the developing role of the intimate and honest relator, and begins willingly to enter into the improvisation of building robust relationships with others.*

The director, as auxiliary, has modelled an unrestricted way of living in the world and as a result is able to speak the unspoken, assisting the protagonist to find her voice by experiencing a 'companion to self'. This act of freedom gives her sufficient confidence to move forward, thus producing social atom repair. It is vital for the auxiliary to be spontaneously disciplined and to create an original response. The director, being free in himself, evokes a similar freedom in the protagonist. She is inspired by the auxiliary and her spontaneity is increased. Max Clayton describes this process. *"There is an increased self awareness in the protagonist. We conceive of this increased self awareness coming about as a result of their own functioning being portrayed externally while the protagonist maintains positive emotional*

contact toward the auxiliary and what they are doing" (1992:28).

### **Connectedness**

Moreno's vision is of men and women creating a world where we work at developing connectedness through much practice. We do this by warming up to the real person in the here and now, and allowing ourselves to be affected and learn from one another. One of the foundation stones of a psychodrama group is the desire to create links between people. This relational aspect of psychodrama is its greatest power, leading away from excessive self absorption and isolation towards becoming part of a greater whole. During a drama, auxiliaries enact aspects of the protagonist's life that assist the protagonist to connect to self, appreciate who they are and also to learn how the group experiences them. Sometimes this is disturbing. The protagonist may face an aspect of self where their spontaneity is obscured. In a group where trust and good will are uppermost, this moment is of great value for all group participants (Clayton, 1992:27). When such a moment occurs, compassion and love are unlocked and a greater connectedness occurs between the group members and the protagonist.

One of the fundamental principles in psychodrama is that we are all linked either positively, negatively or neutrally to one another. This telic link enables group members to increasingly function as adequate auxiliaries for one another, creating a fertile ground in which all may improvise new ways of living. A working group is created where tele relationships are utilised to repair social atom links. For example, the protagonist, inevitably reproducing the telic bonds of their original social atom, may be assisted by a group member who is both like and unlike their siblings. The group member acts as an auxiliary for the protagonist, repairing the original sibling relationships during group interactions and psychodramas.

### **A Willingness to Unveil Demons**

Moreno (1964:28) describes therapeutic theatre as follows. *"The whole past is moved out of its coffin and arrives at a moment's call. It does not only emerge in order to heal itself, for relief and catharsis, but it is also the love for its own demons which drives the theatre on to unchain itself. In order that they may be driven out from their cages they tear up their deepest and most secret wounds, and now they bleed externally before all the eyes of the people"*.

And as the protagonist tears up their deepest and most secret wounds it is essential that the auxiliaries act with commitment as companions on the journey. The auxiliary, as double, acts alongside the protagonist, helping the protagonist to build a unified experience of the self and to develop free expressiveness. This warms the person up to their own abilities. New insights and possibilities emerge. The double plays a significant role in developing trust and a permissive atmosphere. Provocative doubling acts as a role test for protagonists, strengthening their ability to assert themselves and clarify what is significant for them. It also acts as a spontaneity test, disturbing the protagonist in such a way that they act with flexibility, developing under developed roles or creating new roles.

For adequate doubling to be achieved, a high degree of spontaneity and commitment is required, regardless of whether the auxiliary is charged with authentically enacting the role of a significant person in the story or is asked to become the lapping waters of the River Styx. An auxiliary actor must be willing to show self, reveal vulnerability and act spontaneously, and this requires a commitment to unveil personal demons. Social atom repair is essential work that addresses the obstacles that stand in the way. Working through group process and engaging in encounters with other group members also strengthens an actor's awareness of individual processes and of how they block spontaneity. Critical feedback from group members who act as auxiliaries to each other is also a helpful way

of assisting a person to develop progressive roles and this requires a high level of trust between group members.

### **The Art of Moving Toward Denouement**

Denouement is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as *“the unravelling of plot or complications, the final resolution of a play, novel”*. However, this does not convey the shivery, ecstatic experience of a theatrical moment that satisfies utterly. This is experienced in the moment of catharsis in a psychodrama where full expression of the protagonist and auxiliaries leads to the creation of new responses that move the protagonist forward. In this regard, an auxiliary is a self-directed producer of action and form. When the story requires dramatic pause or readiness to shift to a new scene, the auxiliary allows training and intuition to guide them. The director is the chief auxiliary in the enactment, and the other auxiliaries keep generating until the director indicates otherwise. The auxiliary’s faculty for listening and involving themselves as a team member to craft a satisfying enactment has them respond in such a way that the moment is built towards denouement.

Moreno describes this denouement in relationship to the warm-up process in the spontaneous actor. *“The spontaneous act cannot last beyond a certain point in time without weakening. The actor must come to pause sooner or later. Besides the process of act making they must have the process of pause making under control. An act is rhythmically followed by a pause. Tension is followed by relaxation”* (1993:52). A well attuned actor knows when the critical peak has been reached. In the pause phase, they go within self and allow their warm up to the next moment to emerge in a unified way. The pause state is full of potential for the spontaneous actor. In this pause, or empty space, the actor is inspired to create something fresh and appropriate to the moment. An auxiliary moves into the unknown relying on intuition, knowledge of theatre, trust in developing role flexibility and commitment to

the spontaneous state emerging in the moment. This is nowhere more evident than when the director, together with auxiliaries, works with the concept of pacing to achieve a satisfying, dynamic scenario. They learn to recognise the moment when shifting the focus of the enactment will develop a natural progression towards denouement. When the actors are fully in role and maximise or bring each scene to fruition, it naturally leads to the next scene. Knowing when that moment is achieved is critical for spontaneous theatre, and for creating satisfaction for the audience.

### **Aesthetic Production**

Aesthetics in psychodrama take into account some of the underlying currents that exist in a moment of creation. The word aesthetic is derived from the Greek, *‘aisthetikos’*, *‘aisthanomai’*, which means perceive - the person perceiving beauty momentarily joins with the creator as they create. In these moments mutual tele can be experienced, one to one, one to many and vice versa. The word theatre comes from the Greek word *‘theaomai’* which means behold. In psychodrama, the moment of insight, both personal and group-based, is the moment of beholding. Valuing the moment of the new creation assists us to hold onto new understandings and also makes us to know that we are creators capable of transforming our old ways of perceiving. The moment of creating something new requires the spontaneity that comes from an adequate warm up to ourselves at that point in time. It reflects a congruency between our thinking, feeling and action.

The following vignette, demonstrates the beauty of appreciating and holding an aesthetic moment where a subtle transformation takes place in the protagonist - the smallest shift, indicating the birth of something new and delicate.

### **Chopping Wood**

*The protagonist is at the window of the kitchen preparing an evening meal. The light is warming. She is involved and absent at the same time, preparing the food and absorbed in her private world.*

*Director: What do you hear?*

*Protagonist: I hear the thwack of a ball hitting the ground.*

*Director: Choose someone to be the sound of the ball. The protagonist chooses an auxiliary who creates that sound.*

*Protagonist: (shrinking visibly) That's not the right sound. That sound is scary.*

*Auxiliary: What kind of ball is it?*

*Protagonist: Soccer ball.*

*Auxiliary: Oh yeah, that's very different.*

*Here the auxiliary demonstrates his ability to involve himself in the protagonist's world. He is a mindful initiator and double for the protagonist in this moment. As he focuses on becoming an accurate mirror, the auxiliary produces a sharper sound, a thwack sound. The protagonist's face lights up as she warms up more thoroughly to her actual experience of cutting the vegetables whilst listening to the sound of the thwacking ball. In this state of spontaneity the protagonist hears another sound intruding - the sound of the axe splitting wood and then bluntly striking the concrete. The protagonist has a deepening in warm up as she experiences the realness of the enactment. A new auxiliary is coached into precisely reproducing the sound and the irregularity of the fall of the axe onto wood and concrete. The auxiliary, acting as an open learner, is willing to try something new. His enthusiasm for receiving coaching and experimenting with different ways of creating authentic sounds, increases the protagonist's warm up. He models a willingness to improvise and be flexible. This in turn assists the protagonist to become mobile and flexible.*

*The protagonist sees a mental picture of her shoeless son chopping wood with a large axe. I also now have a cruel picture of vulnerable toes and a large axe slicing through them. The mother, in fierce flight, runs down the yard and confronts the boy about his reckless attitude towards his own safety. The boy turns his body inwards and away from the mother and grunts. He is not there, he is protecting himself.*

*The director intervenes, gets alongside the boy and in an aside the boy reveals his love of chopping wood. He unfolds like a sea anemone, feeling not entirely*

*safe, yet willing to enter into dialogue.*

*Director: Do you want to speak to your mum now?*

*Boy: (fairly and with equanimity) I like to chop wood.*

*The protagonist, as herself, now listens thoughtfully to her son. There is a long pause and her body is in a state of quiet, creative receptiveness - a spontaneity state. She is relaxed and thoughtful as she replies.*

*Protagonist: I can see that you love chopping wood. I had forgotten that. We only have this large axe. Maybe you could chop with John or myself with you.*

*Boy: (softly closes in again) That's enough now, Mum.*

Some members of the group wanted the mother and the boy to do more - to insist on the boy staying open, to have the mother challenge the boy. The moment of the creation of the new role may well have been discounted. The group had seen the moment of spontaneity that created a new experience of intimacy in both the roles of the son and the mother, but in their haste to have more of this moment the sea anemone was in danger of being crushed. When the director and the group remain open and warmed up to spontaneity, the protagonist is more likely to act with freedom and purposefulness. In this context there are no preconceived ideas. There is just the moment that emerges from an aesthetic production and the collective spontaneity of the group, and that is enough.

## **Conclusion**

The essence of the auxiliary's work is to warm up to a state of spontaneity and move into the unknown with adequacy. Effective auxiliaries are able to assist in the achievement of a satisfying drama which transforms the psychodramatic experience into a glorious thing. This paper has presented and discussed the fundamental capacities required of an auxiliary ego. These essential elements are wholeheartedness, spontaneity, spanda and flow, freedom, connectedness, a willingness to unveil demons, the art of moving toward denouement and a focus on aesthetic production. Effective auxiliaries act with an inner authority

and power that stirs the creative genius in the protagonist and other group members, and moves people to connect with one another in the world. This too is a glorious thing.

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