

*The following is an excerpt from the book:*

## **Insight Improvisation**

### **Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment**

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*To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.*

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## Foundations of Psolodrama

*The years... when I pursued the inner images, were the most important time of my life. Everything else is to be derived from this. It began at that time, and the later details hardly matter anymore. My entire life consisted in elaborating what had burst forth from the unconscious and flooded me like an enigmatic stream and threatened to break me.*

— Carl Jung (1957)

*Psychodrama is not acting. It is a new world.*

— Jacob Moreno (1941)

**Note:** This chapter describes the conceptual underpinnings and key influences that shaped psolodrama. If you'd like to dive in and try psolodrama, feel free to skip ahead a few chapters, to "The Entryway to Psolodrama" and "The Practice of Psolodrama," and return here when you're ready for a deeper understanding.

Psolodrama is based in the present-moment awareness cultivated in meditation; the bodily awareness and openness to impulse developed in authentic movement; the creativity, play, and expressiveness of theatrical improvisation; and the power of interaction and role-play found in psychodrama. In addition, the therapeutic use of psolodrama has roots in the dream work of Freud, Jung’s explorations with archetypes and the human shadow, and Mindell’s process work, among other forms of psychotherapy.

Before learning the process of psolodrama itself, it is helpful to understand these foundations. The purpose of this chapter is not to fully explain each of these root techniques and therapies (there are already many books devoted to these topics), but rather to distinguish and summarize key aspects each contributes to the practice of psolodrama, and to point to where additional information can be found.

<b>Foundations of Psolodrama</b>	
<p><b><i>Meditation</i></b> mindfulness • choicelessness • lovingkindness</p>	<p><b><i>Authentic Movement</i></b> mover: bodily awareness, being moved, eyes closed • witness: supportive, nonjudgmental container; inner-witness; sharing</p>
<p><b><i>Theatrical Improvisation</i></b> joy of performance • dramatic arc • discovering &amp; committing to a role • spontaneity, flexibility, and saying “yes” • trusting the unknown—entering empty</p>	<p><b><i>Psychodrama</i></b> five psychodramatic roles • role reversal • surplus reality • warm-up, action, and sharing phases • role rehearsal • monodrama, autodrama, and empty chair • skills of the director</p>
<p><b><i>Psychotherapy</i></b> metaphor and symbol • free association • archetype • shadow • existential themes self-actualization • embodiment • peer practice</p>	<p><b><i>Additional Influences</i></b> self-revelatory theater • transpersonal drama therapy • the embodied psyche technique • playwriting on your feet</p>

*(For a comparison of psolodrama to other forms of drama therapy and psychotherapy, please see the last chapter in Part III, “Further Exploration with Psolodrama.”)*

## **Meditation and Psolodrama**

Meditation—both the practice and the concepts underlying it—is at the core of Insight Improvisation, and psolodrama is no exception.

At a basic level, meditation’s contribution to psolodrama is the idea of an introspective journey that leads to greater freedom. A psolodrama *is* a kind of meditation, albeit one that is usually being witnessed, but a meditation in the sense that the psoloist is on her own individual journey into the depths of the psyche, in order to heal, grow, and learn about herself. Traditional meditation practices provide models for this journey, which psolodrama builds on.

Meditation is a way to train the mind to cultivate beneficial kinds of awareness and reduce patterns of suffering. There are many kinds of awareness one exercises in the practice of psolodrama, such as the awareness of the body and the five senses; awareness of inner imagery; awareness of roles, scenes, and stories; awareness of the presence of the witness and the quality of one’s own inner witness. However, there are three fundamental types of awareness, three skills or qualities developed in traditional Buddhist meditation practice—discussed at greater length in Part I of this book—which are central to the practice of psolodrama:

**Mindfulness**—cultivated through *samadhi* (concentration) meditation—is the ability to return to and focus on what is happening in the here and now. In psolodrama,

this ability helps the psoloist to break free of habitual mental patterns of projecting into the future or past (e.g., worrying, obsessing, planning, etc.) and instead focus on what is currently unfolding in the body, emotions, and mind during the psolodrama.

In standard forms of psychotherapy or creative arts therapy, the patient's interaction with the therapist is constantly and naturally returning both to present-moment awareness. However, in psolodrama, mindfulness is a skill that must be developed, as the therapist or peer witness is usually not interacting or speaking, unless they are providing coaching. In practicing psolodrama, as in meditation, both psoloist and witness develop and strengthen the capacity for mindfulness.

As mindfulness grows and deepens, so too does the depth of engagement and exploration in one's own psolodrama. When I listen carefully to my body, for example, the subtlety of my moment-to-moment perception sparks an increasing number of associations to feelings, images, and roles that I can then work with in my psolodrama. In one moment a dull ache in my shoulder may engender a feeling of sadness and fatigue, leading to an image of carrying something on my shoulders, which might cause me to enter the role of a laborer or slave, which I then may associate with feelings of being burdened by family or work. In another moment the sensation of taking a deep breath and releasing my stomach muscles and relaxing on the inside may lead to a feeling of opening and letting go, an image/role of a deflating balloon, and a dialogue between slave and balloon about how it feels to truly release and not hold so much pressure. It is through mindful awareness that the psoloist taps into the flow of themes and associations already present in the body and psyche.

Embodiment in psolodrama becomes an extension of mindfulness, deepening and amplifying it. In the same way a meditator might hold his attention to a painful sensation in the body in order to learn more about it, the psoloist embodies that pain—moving as it, sounding and speaking as it—to learn more about it. (See the subsection on embodiment at the end of this chapter for a discussion of Mindell’s Process Work in relation to psolodrama.)

Mindfulness is equally important in the act of witnessing, and in the sharing process following the psolodrama. For the witness, the psoloist is the “object” of her meditation—she repeatedly brings her attention back to the psoloist, returning her mind from thoughts and other distractions, in order to take in exactly what the psoloist is doing and saying in each moment. In the sharing process, the interaction and dialogue between psoloist and witness naturally activates present-moment awareness. However, of the two, the witness especially needs to take care that she is really listening, engaging, and supporting the psoloist throughout the sharing process, and remains mindful of the words she is choosing to describe what she saw, heard, felt, etc. in order to avoid judgments and projections.

**Choicelessness**, or choiceless awareness—developed in *vipassana* (insight) meditation—is the ability to open the mind and senses to all channels of information, whatever object of awareness is arising and passing away in a given moment. This ability helps the psoloist enter a state of spontaneity and creativity, the flow of improvisation. By not becoming overly absorbed or attached to a single focus, the psoloist allows the unexpected to enter. Even in the midst of a dialogue between two roles, the texture or temperature of the floor could trigger a certain memory or emotion; a picture in the mind

could affect the position of the body and the quality of voice, leading to a shift in role, etc.

Meditation may take me anywhere—if I am truly open and choiceless while practicing *vipassana*, I may become aware of aspects of myself that I do not confront in daily life: fears, memories, attachments, habits—elements of my shadow that are uncomfortable to hold with awareness. It is the same with psolodrama: if I am truly practicing openness, choicelessness, I do not know what I will encounter in my drama. There will be parts of myself that I do not wish to see that psolodrama is inviting me to dialogue with. If I can stay present and open, not avoid or run away from them, but instead take up the challenge and enter these roles and dialogues with a spirit of exploration—a willingness to not know where they will lead me—greater insight and understanding can develop.

Choicelessness—openness to all six sense doors—is equally a factor in skillful witnessing and sharing. As witness, am I open to all the information coming in, not only what I'm observing in the psoloist but also what I notice in myself? (*See chart "Witnessing Authentic Movement: What the Witness is Aware of" in the chapter on Authentic Movement in Part I of this book.*) In sharing, both psoloist and witness can benefit by cultivating openness to what may arise in the conversation—and what is coming in through all of the sense doors, including feelings/emotions, inner imagery, etc.

**Lovingkindness**, practiced in *metta* meditation, is vital to psolodrama. In the same way that the witness cultivates a non-judgmental, caring attitude, so too the psoloist is developing an accepting and loving inner witness—for which the outer witness, the

therapist or friend or peer, by being nonjudgmental, present, and non-projecting, can be a model.

Both the inner and outer witness provide the positive container within which the psoloist can take risks and explore new possibilities. In order to embrace all the roles and scenes that arise, I not only need mindful and choiceless awareness and acceptance, I also need to bring a warm, open, and compassionate heart. *Metta* is essential for me to feel safe enough to bring out the shadow parts of me, the parts I tend to neglect or love less, or feel ashamed of.

The witness intentionally cultivates *metta* before, during, and after the psolodrama to create a space so safe that the psoloist feels he can share anything and everything, including the shadow parts of himself. During the psolodrama the witness is aware of her inner attitude, noticing thoughts that are judging or comparing (e.g., herself with the psoloist), and consciously letting those thoughts go. She reminds herself of her intention to serve the psoloist, and returns to her task with a relaxed breath, a smile, a loving gaze, and a caring heart. In the sharing process, *metta* is expressed not only through the witness's careful and caring choice of words, but also through her empathic, supportive connection with the psoloist, expressed through eye contact, vocal tone, physical gesture, etc.

### **Authentic Movement and Psolodrama**

For anyone wishing to practice psolodrama, being well grounded in classic authentic movement is extremely helpful. Authentic movement has influenced the development of psolodrama in a number of important ways:

## As Mover

Authentic movement anchors the psolodrama practice in the body, and helps the practitioner differentiate between organic, physical impulse (“being moved”) and one’s habitually controlling, planning, thinking mind. Authentic movement also contributes to psolodrama the idea of working with eyes closed as a way to connect to one’s inner life and let go of performance mind.

As the first phase of any psolodrama, authentic movement helps the psoloist shift their mental and physical state from the busyness of the day and a verbal check-in and/or other warm-up to being receptive, present, and listening to the body.

As I enter the space, by tuning into the body I am better able to let go of excess thought, planning mind, neurotic cycling, etc. Beginning psolodrama with authentic movement enables me to enter empty and let go of “good ideas.” Like diving into water, I am suddenly in a different realm, a realm of the senses, a physical realm that can give rise to feelings and inner imagery.

Although in subsequent phases of the psolodrama I add words, roles, dialogue, etc., the basic grounding in authentic movement is always there, throughout the entire process, informing every moment. Even though I am playing roles, I keep my eyes closed, helping maintain a connection with inner experience and impulse. I proceed slowly, tuning into feelings, noticing what the body wants to do, letting it guide me to what’s next—which might be a new role or scene, or might simply be returning to movement. As described in the earlier chapter on role stream, authentic movement is like the ocean that waves (roles) emerge from, and I can just as easily slide back into the ocean and experience being moved for as long as I wish in my psolodrama process.

### As Witness

Authentic movement's other extremely important contributions to psolodrama include the role of the witness, and how the witness helps create a safe, supportive container for the work; the concept of the formation of the inner-witness and how it is modeled on one's external witnesses; and the idea of the sharing process, particularly the way the witness serves as a mirror for the mover, playing back for him what she saw and heard.

(All of these aspects of authentic movement are explored in much greater detail in Part I of this book, in the chapter on Authentic Movement—which also includes references that describe moving and witnessing in depth.)

### Theatrical Improvisation and Psolodrama

Psolodrama is a form of acting and improvisation, and by nature incorporates and benefits from all of the skills and training of theater artists. Many of these elements—as well as exercises to practice them—have been discussed in Part II of this book. Here is a brief summary of some of the fundamental ways in which theater and theatrical improvisation contribute to the practice of psolodrama:

#### The Joy of Performance

A psolodrama *is* a performance—a spontaneous one-person show.

It's true that it is usually for a tiny audience (of one, or sometimes zero); the performer's eyes are often closed; and the “performer” is actually practicing “Being Mind” rather than “Performance Mind” (discussed earlier, in the chapter entitled “Naked

Improvisation”)—actively letting go of her tendencies to perform and instead returning to a mindful, relaxed relationship to the present moment.

Nonetheless, what emerges in psolodrama is a play, a drama, and it is being performed—roles and scenes are enacted, and often a coherent story emerges.

The result, as a performance, can be thrilling. I and others have often said that some of the best theater we get to see is one-to-one with a peer (or as a therapist witnessing clients) practicing psolodrama. What is particularly gripping about psolodrama is the honesty, depth, and spontaneity of it. Usually to see theater of such power we must seek out a well-written and well-rehearsed play; most improvisation is of the “improv-comedy” variety. To see an improvisation that touches on existential themes, personal yet universal tragedy, that is reaching for a deep understanding of the human condition—and doing it in a way that is wildly creative, metaphorical, symbolic, sometimes profoundly touching and other times utterly hilarious—is truly rare.

Most actors love performing, and love to be in a great play. Psolodrama benefits from this inclination: as the drama develops, the psoloist often becomes increasingly engaged in her own process. As she enters “the zone”—no longer thinking, just doing, letting the roles take over and following them wherever they need to go—there is behind the process a great joy and energy that develops, a love of performing the psolodrama, that helps sustain and carry the psoloist through whatever challenges she encounters along the way—fear of going too deep, getting too emotional, not being able to confront certain truths, not knowing where to go next, etc. The sheer joy at simultaneously creating and performing such a potent play becomes the fuel that powers the psoloist to greater heights and depths, and ultimately toward deeper self-understanding.

### Dramatic Arc

A good psolodrama is like a good play: there are characters, a story, emotional changes—and usually something is learned in the process. The psoloist is informed by his understanding of story and dramatic structure. Usually this is not intellectual but instinctual—the psoloist is creating a story that is satisfying *to him*, which often means breaking conventions and clichés and discovering different story forms, different dramatic arcs. These are sometimes nonlinear, motivated less by a drive to move the plot forward, and more by a desire to listen deeply to what different roles—different parts of the self—want to say, and to cook the interaction between those roles (as a good psychodrama director would; more about this in the subsection on psychodrama, below).

### Discovering and Committing to a Role

The power of psolodrama, for the psoloist, builds as he applies the awareness and skillset that an actor brings. Chief among those skills is the ability to enter a role physically, vocally, and emotionally; to connect with the emotional truth of that role; to empathize with how that role feels; and to act on that empathy.

We say an actor is *committed* when he fully embodies a role—bringing his entire energy, passion, body, and voice. For those newer to acting, psolodrama can help develop the ability to discover and commit to a role. Psolodrama invites the psoloist to play multiple characters and speak as them, to discover how those characters are feeling, and to draw out the specifics of those characters further through dialogue and story. In addition, an outside coach—be it a therapist or a peer—can encourage the fledgling actor/psoloist to more fully take on a role physically and vocally, finding gestures and

body language as well as vocal qualities that bring the character to life. As he enters the role more fully, the psoloist can more easily suspend his own disbelief and invest more completely in the unfolding story.

What frequently results is a cycle of positive reinforcement, in which the psoloist's greater commitment to playing the roles results in a more emotionally compelling psolodrama, which in turn inspires the psoloist to become less inhibited and embody the roles even more.

### **Spontaneity, Flexibility, and Saying "Yes"**

A psolodrama is an improvisation, and many of the principals of good improv underlie effective psolodrama. The ability to jump from style to style, moment to moment, role to role, with complete flexibility and spontaneity is a skill that serves psolodrama, with its intuitive and fluid structure. This is a skill many of us have as children—the ability to naturally assume all kinds of roles as part of play—but tend to lose as adults. Psolodrama encourages and exercises that flexibility.

Part of being spontaneous in improv is learning to say "yes" to what is happening, right now. In role stream or scene stream, a role may arise that causes the psoloist to want to say "Yecch! Not this again!" But if she can stay with that role, let it speak, and bring it into her psolodrama, she will invariably find why it's coming up yet again, why she has such strong aversion to it, and what learning more about that role can contribute to her own understanding of herself.

Classic improvisation works when one actor makes an offer and the other accepts it. If the scene begins with one actor saying "Doctor, I'm worried about an ache in my elbow," the other actor can accept the offer by saying "Sorry to hear that. Tell me more—"

when did you first notice the ache?” Negating occurs when the second actor denies the offer, e.g. “I’m sorry, do I know you?” Good improv is a series of offers and acceptances, causing the scene to naturally build and progress. Psolodrama works precisely the same way, but one person is playing all the roles.

### **Trusting the Unknown—Entering Empty**

An improvised scene, before the first word is spoken or physical action occurs, is like a blank sheet of paper. This can be exciting, a moment of infinite possibility—but it can also be terrifying: what’s going to happen? Will it be good? The same kind of trust and embrace of the unknown that improvisers bring to their craft, the psoloist in psolodrama must also have or develop. This is one benefit of having a series of steps—authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream (the “Entryway to Psolodrama” described in a subsequent chapter)—prior to the psolodrama itself, which gives the psoloist a chance to scribble a bit on that empty sheet, to make random sketches and throw them away, keeping only what is meaningful and building on that.

### **Psychodrama and Psolodrama**

Psychodrama is the system of therapeutic role play created by Jacob Moreno beginning in the 1920’s, in Vienna, and developed in subsequent decades by Moreno and his wife, Zerka, in the United States.

Psolodrama began as a way to do a one-person psychodrama, but one based in authentic movement. Over time, psolodrama has evolved into a more open practice, not

as tied to the structures of psychodrama. But many of the core concepts and techniques used in psychodrama are still central to the power of psolodrama.

Psychodrama contributes a number of important elements to psolodrama:

### **The Five Psychodramatic Roles**

As psychodrama developed, Moreno discovered new approaches to role play, using members of the group to provide support for the central role in a number of creative ways. Typically, there are five roles present in a standard psychodrama:

**The Director**—the leader of the group, often a clinician, whose task is to warm up the group, to help select a protagonist, to facilitate the action of the psychodrama, and to lead the sharing and closure afterward.

**The Protagonist**—the central role in the psychodrama, whose story or issue the group is playing out. Once selected, the protagonist usually begins by sharing his story with the director (during a “walk and talk”), and then selects auxiliary egos to play the other roles.

**The Auxiliary Ego**—any other role in the unfolding story, enacted by another member of the group. Moreno chose the term auxiliary ego (rather than “the other,” or “antagonist”) in order to underscore how the other characters in a psychodrama are actually projections of the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings (and not “real” people). The protagonist usually starts by casting a group member to play the role, and then models the role for that person (through “role reversal”—see below). The protagonist continues to supply words and action for an auxiliary by role reversing throughout the psychodrama, although sometimes the director may allow an auxiliary to improvise.

**The Double**—a special form of auxiliary ego, the double represents the inner voice, or hidden thoughts and feelings, of the protagonist. Usually chosen by the protagonist (when prompted by the director), the double typically stands next to the protagonist and slightly behind, at first mirroring the protagonist physically and echoing key words. Next, the double may venture to speak, and begin to amplify, what she senses the protagonist is feeling but is not saying. The protagonist can then choose to repeat those words, or instead say what is really true for him. By deeply empathizing with the protagonist, and helping him get in touch with hidden or unexpressed feelings, the double can help the protagonist break through to a new level of authenticity and self-discovery. (Adam Blatner’s chapter on the double in *Acting In*, 1996, is a useful and succinct guide to the range of possibilities contained in this role.)

**The Group**—in classic psychodrama, the group is not merely a passive audience, but instead plays a number of active roles: warming up together, actively listening to and supporting the action of the psychodrama, staying open and available to being cast as auxiliary ego or double, interacting in various ways with the protagonist when prompted by the director, and speaking personally in the sharing process.

As described in subsequent chapters, the five psychodramatic roles also play a central part in psolodrama—each of the five roles can appear, but in a form adapted for a one-person enactment. (The Five Roles exercise, described in the next chapter, is designed to provide focused practice on embodying and speaking as these different roles.)

## Role Reversal

One of Moreno's major discoveries, one that sets psychodrama apart from standard role-play, is the technique of role reversal: at any time, the protagonist can switch roles with an auxiliary ego, taking on their role while the person playing the auxiliary ego temporarily becomes the protagonist. The power of role reversal is that it is empathy embodied; e.g., if I'm arguing with my spouse I can *try* to empathize with her, but if I literally must become her and speak as her, I cannot help but empathize and feel how things must feel from her point of view.

Whereas in psychodrama there are alternatives to role reversal—such as the person playing an auxiliary ego role improvising in that role—in psolodrama all dialogue happens through role-reversal, as there is only one psoloist.

## Surplus Reality

Surplus reality is Moreno's term for the imagination. Psychodrama is not married to mundane reality, to how things actually happened in the past or "should" happen in the future. In psychodrama, the protagonist can play out his memory of childhood, for example, without concern for complete accuracy; instead, the director helps him find what feels emotionally true. By doing so, a window is opened in the heart, inviting feelings (as well as insights) that may not have been fully expressed in childhood.

The concept of surplus reality offers infinite freedom: one can play out a dream, a desired or feared future, a corrective version of the past, even an absurdist fantasy. In fact, practically all of psychodrama is surplus reality—even a carefully remembered

scene from the past is still a memory that by nature is subjective—the original moment is “re-imagined.”

Ultimately, surplus reality is, in Freudian terms, projection—psychodrama (and perhaps even more so, psolodrama) is the protagonist’s (or psoloist’s) projection of himself onto the blank canvas provided by the psychodramatic stage (or psolodramatic empty space).

### **Psychodramatic Phases: Warm-up, Action, and Sharing/Warm-down**

**Warm-up.** When doing psychodrama with an individual or group, the director provides a warm-up to the action (the psychodrama itself), so that participants can be fully ready and present throughout. A warm-up can include some kind of check-in or dialogue; sociometric, improvisational, and physical exercises; and—in the case of a group—a selection process to choose a protagonist for the psychodrama. The importance of sufficiently warming up a group or individual cannot be overstated; the success of psychodrama—and psolodrama—is largely based on this. *(See the next two chapters for warm-ups and “entryway practices” typically used before psolodrama.)*

**The action phase** is the psychodrama itself, which begins once the protagonist is chosen. Action often starts with a “walk-and-talk,” in which the director accompanies the protagonist in a walk around the space, eliciting a description of the issue the protagonist would like to work on. The next steps are typically “setting the scene”—asking where the scene takes place, and sometimes arranging chairs or props to evoke the setting—and “casting”—choosing one or more auxiliary egos (and sometimes a double) to help play

out the scene. The scene is then enacted (through dialogue and role-reversal), usually leading to further scenes.

The action phase in psolodrama is parallel to but a good deal less structured—more fluid and improvisational—than the psychodramatic one.

**Warm-down/Sharing.** Once the action phase is complete (either due to a natural ending or the director finding an ending in the allotted time), there is a final “warm-down” phase, of which the sharing process is the major component. Often before sharing, auxiliary egos are asked to “de-role”—taking off their assigned role(s) as if they were invisible costumes, and saying, for example, “I am no longer your father, I am now \_\_\_\_” (their actual name). De-roling is designed to help prevent both protagonist and auxiliary actors from carrying the residue of the role, or the projection of roles onto others, into the sharing phase or beyond the session.

In the psychodramatic sharing process, the group sits in a circle with the director, who invites group members to speak about how the psychodrama resonated with their own feelings and life experience. Analysis and advice are prohibited; instead, the group is invited to share their vulnerability in the same way the protagonist did by sharing her psychodrama. The sharing process is not an afterthought but actually one of the keys that makes psychodrama so powerful: as others share from their own lives, catalyzed by the emotional content of the psychodrama, they too can become moved—making the sharing circle a place where the psychodrama is truly shared with each and every group member. Seeing how her psychodrama affected others, the protagonist’s experience is integrated, socialized, and normalized. She realizes that “I am not the only one who has felt this

way;” “I am not the only one who has behaved this way;” “I am not the only one whose family dynamic is like this;” etc.

Following the sharing process, the director can optionally end the session with some kind of closing ritual, which can include speaking (e.g., one-word feelings/take-aways standing in a circle), physical contact (such as holding hands), making a sound together as a group, etc. Some groups may require more warming-down—e.g., yoga or other physical activity, a more extended “check-out”, etc.—depending on the impact of the psychodrama and the nature of the group.

In psolodrama, there is also a warm-down and sharing process. Explicit de-roling is not necessary but before meeting her witness, the psoloist may take a minute or so in silence to relax , let the last role or scene go, take in what just happened, and notice what her current emotional state is. Although the sharing process in psolodrama is typically between a single witness and the psoloist, rather than an entire group and the protagonist, it can be equally deep and revealing—sometimes more revealing—given the intimate bond between the two.

### **Role Rehearsal**

A specific application of surplus reality, role *rehearsal* (not to be confused with role *reversal*) is the psychodramatic technique of trying on a new behavior in a future context. Often the last step of the action phase of the psychodrama, role rehearsal provides the protagonist an opportunity to take what she has learned in her psychodrama and practice it through role play.

For example, a woman who is challenged when trying to communicate with her father may play a final scene in which she imagines calling or visiting her father

sometime in the coming week, drawing upon what she learned in the earlier, past-based scenes of her psychodrama in order to better relax and empathize with her father.

Role rehearsal can appear spontaneously in psolodrama as real-life roles emerge that the protagonist wishes to speak to. This is driven not by a conscious choice on the psoloist's part to prepare for the future, but rather by the intuitive, non-linear emergence of roles from the body, inner-imagery, etc.

Sometimes a psychodrama can take the form of a “spiral,” (Chesner, 1994) in which the action begins in the present (the presenting issue), spirals back to the past to understand the root of the problem, and then spirals into the future to practice alternatives (role rehearsal). It's useful to be aware of the psychodramatic spiral; however, psolodrama, with its nonlinear, spontaneous approach, less commonly conforms to such a pattern.

### **Monodrama, Autodrama, and The Empty Chair**

As Moreno developed psychodrama, he distinguished variations on the form in which one person had greater power over the unfolding action. These three techniques—monodrama, autodrama, and the empty chair—are clear predecessors of psolodrama. In particular, the empty chair—described at length in the next chapter—can be used as an important intermediate step when training to do psolodrama.

#### **Monodrama**

A monodrama is a psychodrama in which the protagonist plays all the auxiliary ego roles. In a sense, most psychodramas are really monodramas, because the protagonist enacts all the roles through role reversal. But in a strict monodrama, other members of the

group do not participate; the director works only with the protagonist. Monodrama can also be one approach for individual psychotherapy using psychodrama; however, in a strict monodrama the therapist does not step in to play other roles or to double the protagonist.

### **Autodrama**

An autodrama is a psychodrama with one key difference: the protagonist directs him or herself. This technique can be used in a therapy group, and is particularly apt for a group member who seems irritated when being directed by another, or who tends to jump ahead and make decisions about what should happen next. Autodrama works best when the protagonist has seen a few psychodramas and has a good idea of the form, how role reversal, doubling, and the psychodramatic spiral work. But with a little outside guidance, even someone brand new to psychodrama can do a simple autodrama, if given the right instructions—e.g., inviting her to use other group members to help enact a scene from her life.

If a psychodramatist were to walk into the room in the midst of a psolodrama, what he would see would look like a cross between a monodrama and autodrama: the psoloist is directing herself, *and* playing all the roles. (Of course, he might wonder why the psoloist's eyes are closed—and where the strange plot and characters came from...)

### **The Skills of the Psychodrama Director**

So much of what a good psychodrama director does informs what the psoloist does in psolodrama. In particular, the director's ability to create a safe container; provide sufficient warm-up for the group as a whole and the protagonist in particular; listen for

and develop the seeds of the drama; use the tools described above, such as role reversal, the double, etc. to “cook” the conflict and/or emotion; and help the protagonist find a satisfying ending—all of these skills can help make psolodrama a more creative and effective practice.

Conversely, I have personally found that my practice of psolodrama makes me a better, more intuitive and flexible psychodrama director. (More on this in the subsequent chapter, *Further Exploration with Psolodrama*.)

## Foundations in Psychotherapy

Psolodrama as a form of psychotherapy has its roots in the work of Freud, Jung, Rogers, Mindell, and others. Those influences are described at greater length in my academic treatise on Insight Improvisation (Gluck, 2005). Here is a highly condensed version:

### Metaphor and Symbol

As in Freud’s work with dreams (1900), so much in psolodrama is communicated through metaphors and symbols. Freud’s interpretation of these was often sexual; in psolodrama the themes are more often (but not exclusively) existential.

A key difference between symbols in dreams and those in psolodrama is that the ones in psolodrama can often interpret *themselves*, through role-play and dialogue. For example, if I find myself playing a “Mud Monster” in my psolodrama, I may ask, as the protagonist, “what are you doing in my psolodrama?” The monster may reply: “You need to get your hands dirty! Dig in the dirt! Try new things! Play! Be messy!” Much of

psolodrama's power to convey insight is through this ability to let symbols/metaphors speak.

### Free Association

There is a strong parallel between the roles of witness and psoloist and the roles of analyst and patient in Freudian analysis. One link is the concept of free association, in which the patient is encouraged to speak about whatever comes to mind. Psolodrama is like a fully embodied form of free association: the psoloist is enacting whatever comes into her mind—or body—and bringing it to life through monologue and dialogue.

### Archetype

There is something about the psolodramatic process that tends to invite roles that are archetypal. Whereas typical psychodrama tends to deal with real-life relationships (family, friends, co-workers), typical psolodrama taps into fantasy realms that draw forth characters from mythology and fairy tales (valiant princes and talking animals), as well as unexpected leaps of the imagination (a rotting tree trunk, God, the Buddha, a soldier in Vietnam). As Jung described (and Landy, in the drama therapy world, has helped catalogue—1993, pp. 256-260), archetypes are fairly universal from culture to culture, and carry their own special power and meaning. The prevalence of archetypal roles in psolodrama is another factor that helps make it such a powerful, evocative, form.

### Shadow

As described in *The Red Book* (2009) and elsewhere, Jung took it upon himself to personally journey into the realm of the human shadow, beginning with his own. The

concept of the shadow—beautifully described by Robert Bly (1988)—is intrinsic to the purpose of psolodrama. Like Jung, the psoloist is embarking on her own personal journey into her shadow, with the explicit goal of discovering, unearthing, and exploring some personal theme or challenge through the practice by consciously taking herself to her own growing edge.

### **Existential Themes**

As described in the work of Yalom and other existential psychologists, the dilemmas of human existence—the inevitability of death, freedom and responsibility, existential isolation, and meaninglessness (1980, pp.8-9)—are central to the work of psychotherapy.

Psolodrama tends to gravitate toward these themes for a number of reasons. First, as an individual exploration, it naturally invites contemplation of isolation—one’s individual journey through life—as well as reflection on death; second, it is a mindful practice that allows the mind to settle and focus beyond surface issues to deeper, underlying concerns; third, the presence of a supportive, nonjudgmental witness tends to allow the psoloist, over time, to feel sufficiently safe to explore his deepest fears and challenges.

### **Self-actualization**

Another influence on psolodrama (and Insight Improvisation as a whole) as a form of psychotherapy is client- or person-centered therapy, and the work of humanistic psychology pioneer Carl Rogers. Rogers believed that it is the role of the psychotherapist to unconditionally affirm the client, to empathize with them, and by doing so help the

client discover his own answers (1951). Psolodrama fits this Rogerian approach: the psoloist is finding her own answers, within the empathic, supportive container provided by the witness, both during the psolodrama itself and in the sharing process afterwards.

### **Embodiment**

A Jungian psychologist, Arnold Mindell discovered through his own experiments with “secondary process”—the unconscious patterns of the body and mind—the power of embodying the unconscious and bringing it to life. In Mindell’s Process Work (also known as Process-Oriented Psychology), the therapist helps the client tune into secondary processes and express them through visualization, movement, sound, and words—and by doing so help integrate what has been unconscious into one’s “primary,” conscious process (1985).

Psolodrama works in a similar way. Authentic movement provides the vehicle to let the body lead, so that secondary processes can arise naturally, unfiltered by the censoring mind. The psoloist responds to these organic impulses by letting them fill her body with movement, sound, and words—she embodies the secondary process by becoming a role or character. As this role (an auxiliary ego) interacts with other roles, including the protagonist, the psoloist is able to integrate the secondary process/auxiliary ego with her conscious primary process/protagonist, with the help of the director, double, etc.

### **Peer Practice**

Forms of peer-to-peer therapy and mutual support, such as co-counseling (CCI-USA, 2014), have strong parallels to psolodrama. Psolodrama is a form designed to be

practiced by friends/peers (its development began that way), although it works equally well within the context of a client-therapist process. In co-counseling the role of the counselor is to help their partner work through whatever issue is arising for him, mainly by helping him express his emotions fully. The witness in psolodrama has a similar task, but carries it out through silent and supportive witnessing (unless the psoloist requests coaching), and by sharing after the psolodrama.

### **Additional Influences**

A few other important influences on psolodrama bear mentioning:

**Self-revelatory theater** is a drama therapy term (often shortened to “self-rev”) describing personal, psychologically revealing theater, typically taking the form of an autobiographical one-person show. I have practiced self-rev for years, creating my own pieces as well as helping others (theater colleagues and therapy clients) write and perform their own. Psolodrama is, in a sense, the simplest form of self-rev, with no set, props, costumes, writing, or rehearsal required—it is a spontaneous form of self-revelatory theater.

**Transpersonal drama therapy.** Having trained in the transpersonal drama therapy approach with Saphira Linden (2012) and Penny Lewis, I feel particular resonance with the concept of the whole person: the idea that each individual is fundamentally well and whole, and that as therapists our goal is to help the individual get back in touch with this original self. Psolodrama, too, is based in the idea that given a supportive and caring container the psoloist can find her own way to discover the core of herself that is essential, whole, complete, and well.

**The Embodied Psyche Technique**, created by Penny Lewis, is a transpersonal drama therapy technique (2000, pp. 268-275) in which parts of the psyche dialogue with one another—e.g., the inner child talks with the ego, and the two go on a journey to find the unclaimed inner feminine. Psolodrama often resembles the Embodied Psyche Technique, as parts of the self emerge, dialogue, and seek understanding and integration.

**Playwriting on Your Feet**, a technique developed by Jean-Claude van Itallie (1997) during a period in which I was actively collaborating with him on several theater projects, uses authentic movement as a launching point for improvisations involving the characters in a play being developed. I cite this as an inspiration for psolodrama, as it shares the same basic progression from silent authentic movement to active role play with multiple characters.

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## **Additional Resources**

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