THE APOTROPAIC PSYCHODRAMA AND THE MORENO SCRIPTS

MERLYN S. PITZELE

• *The interview reveals that the protagonist, de-energized and discomposed by his insomnia, attributes it to quarrels with his wife. On the stage, he encounters her through an auxiliary, reverses roles and ventilates his feelings, working through to a rational exchange, but he is not moved to great depth, profounder feelings are not experienced. There is no catharsis. The Director says, "What is the very worst thing that can happen between you and your wife? Let's see it." After considering the question, the protagonist says, "She could have a stroke and die while she is screaming at me." The scene is set and enacted. At the climax, the protagonist is in catharsis.*

• *Dependent on her job, the protagonist suffers from excessive tension at work because of the sexual aggressiveness of her employer. Her enactment of her problem is less than fully dimensional because of her inhibitions and resistances. The Director asks her to imagine her worst fears. Between quitting her job to become unemployed and being raped after hours in the office she decides that the rape is most fearsome. She is nearly hysterical as the scene is enacted. De-roled and calmed, she begins a healthy laugh. Asked about it, she says she feels ridiculous, "That couldn't happen." She leaves the stage declaring that she is much relieved.*

• *The protagonist is in training to become a psychodramatist. His efforts at directing have been rigorously criticized and he lacks confidence to continue, no longer certain of his abilities. He has enacted, with the assistance of the group, his disappointing experiences and his feelings. They are scenes he has repeatedly envisioned in his mind and evoke no real emotion on the stage. He is asked to fantasize the worst thing that could happen to him professionally. He imagines that in the midst of a drama he is directing, the protagonist and auxiliaries walk off the stage and denounce him as incompetent. The event is psychodramatised and he reaches catharsis. After being de-roled and after sharing, he leaves the stage convinced he can become a capable director.*

The apotropaic confrontation through ritualistic enactment of the ulti-

mate evil or tragedy that may be anticipated is familiar practice in some primitive and preliterate cultures. Through the mounting tension of magical rites, Dionysian in their abandon, participants close with the demonic and conditions of *ex stasis* are achieved. It is catharsis. With the return to reality, there is an awareness of extended resources of courage and the feeling of new and greater power.

For the primitive, the fears confronted may be real or illusory. For the protagonist in psychodrama, the "worst possible fear" is by definition beyond probability. In its enactment, he is safeguarded against pathological trauma by the Director's ability to strike the scene, de-role the actors and return the protagonist to reality. But the curative effect of the encounter with the "worst fear" inheres in its becoming self-evident as an illusion, thus palpably phobic. What can be expected in life is less harrowing than what has been experienced in psychodrama. He has already met on the stage the most his imagination can dread—and he has been restored and revitalized by the drama's closure and the sharing of the group.

J. L. Moreno directed his first apotropaic psychodrama in 1939 and reported it in a published paper titled "Psychodrama Shock Therapy." Working with a patient in a state of remission, he returned her on the stage to a psychotic state, her worst fear. "Psychodrama Shock Therapy" was, however, a broader term for Moreno. Under it he subsumed both apotropaic psychodramas and others which were directed to scenes of extreme intensity. He employed what he called psychodramatic shock to achieve catharsis in cases of schizophrenia, manic-depression and psychoneurosis for the principal purpose, as he wrote, of "gaining insight into the patient's social atom, effecting recall and perfecting diagnoses."

It is two years later before there is recorded an apotropaic scene in a psychodrama with a non-psychotic protagonist. Moreno uses a partial script of the drama to illustrate "The Function of the Social Investigator in Experimental Psychodrama"—"experimental psychodrama" in this context meaning the use of classical psychodrama in providing controlled experiments in the social sciences. Only incidentally he remarks that "in this [apotropaic] scene, William [the protagonist], has achieved a certain catharsis . . . it is the *sine qua non* for the removal of that fear."

Though none of the earlier scripts were published, starting in 1944 Moreno made occasional use of apotropaic scenes in dramas where the protagonists felt beset by obsessive anxieties. Several years later, when Zerka Toeman was professionally qualified and began to direct psychodramas at The Psychodramatic Institute in New York City, she staged such scenes to stimulate cathartic release whenever they were indicated by the protagonists' problem.

The manifest power of carefully directed apotropaic psychodrama sessions is now widely known in the profession and to their direction two cautionary caveats may be attached. The first is the need to thoroughly de-role the protagonist. The importance of effective de-roling cannot be over emphasized. The following case provides one example of inconclusiveness:

A woman, sharing responsibility with her sister for a seriously ill, aged mother is the protagonist. She and her sister, without a former history of such feelings, are strongly hostile, at odds over their mother's care. The protagonist living at home does not want the mother removed to an institution. The other, living and engaged away from home, wants the mother institutionalized. The protagonist believes her sister shirks filial duties. The other calls the protagonist "neurotic" and "obsessed to keep mother under your wing." In her psychodrama, the protagonist was directed to confront the "worst possible development." She enacted a scene finding her mother suddenly dead. She felt and displayed extreme emotion and experienced catharsis. After her session, she met with her sister and amicably agreed that the mother be moved to a nursing home. This was accomplished, but the hostility between the sisters, recessing briefly, soon centered on a new grievance and became as intense as before. The erstwhile protagonist, holding to the fantasy that her mother has died, refused, to the sister's bitter resentment, to visit the mother in her new setting.

The second caveat attaches to psychodrama *a deux*. For these, sharing is necessarily limited. Nor can the *a deux* protagonist have a welcoming return into a group with its sharing and support, analgesia for vestigial pain, its existential mode a bridge to life in the workaday world. The protagonist coming through an apotropaic experience is often especially in need of the therapeutic balm uniquely provided by the group. Without it being available, the *a deux* director can only offer more of his self.

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The Moreno Scripts: Anyone working with the Moreno canon must contend with the problem of the scripts.

A valid distinction may be made between the less fully-formed psychodramatic encounters that J. L. Moreno directed before 1936 and what may be called *clinical psychodrama* that he began to practice after that date and as it is practiced today. There are accounts of the earlier efforts, but the first recorded and published script appeared in *Sociometry*, Vol. I, dated July-October, 1937.

In 1936, Moreno was granted a license by the State of New York to

open a mental hospital called Beacon Hill Sanitarium located on the present site of the Moreno Institute in Beacon, New York. Shortly after receiving patients at the Sanitarium, students came to observe and learn the method that was first known as "Inter-personal Therapy", later as psychodrama. Among the first who came to observe and learn, and bring students with her, was Helen H. Jennings of Teachers College, Columbia University. As Moreno staged a psychodrama, one of her group would take notes which became the raw material for published scripts.

At his leisure, Moreno would review notes taken on a number of psychodramas adding or deleting as he saw fit, then passing them on for typing to, "among others, Joseph Sargent and Mrs. McEvoy who served for a while as part-time secretary. At some sessions, when no volunteer note-taker was present, Moreno would try to recall the drama and make his own notes for a typist.

Note-taking was put on a more regular basis when some who had come to Beacon as patients were discharged but stayed on at the institution for therapeutic employment. One or another was assigned to attend sessions in the theatre and take notes. They alternated in the task with Ernest Fantl, M.D., who was Assistant Physician on the hospital staff. The individual interests of various note-takers is reflected in what they recorded. For many of the therapeutic employees, their emphasis was on the dramatic aspects of the session; Fantel's interest was in the medical-psychiatric aspects. An inconsistency in the scripts was unavoidable.

Moreno's final script, *Psychodrama of a Marriage* appeared in the journal, *Group Psychotherapy,* Vol. XIX, (1966), eight years before his death. Over a period of 30 years a large number of different people served as rapporteurs for Moreno with the consequence that the scripts are of vastly different fidelity and completeness. Until 1944, the scripts are virtually all dialog, having only occasional and fragmentary descriptions of action on the stage—an unaccountable omission in the recording of a modality with action its first principle. In the collaboration of Zerka Toeman and Moreno, it was soon realized that a vital dimension had been missing and, in adding it, what happened in a psychodrama became more comprehensible to the reader.

Zerka Toeman became an employee in 1942. An important part of her assignment was to be in attendance in the theatre and take notes. For the first time, Moreno had an assistant who could write in shorthand. He also had one who saw the importance of having the action described if a reader was to understand what went on during a psychodrama. The combination of a sharp eye and a fast hand made for a distinct change in the scripts. That was revealed initially in *Sociometry,* Vol. VII, (1944) the psychodrama of a military trainee whose work suffered because he was troubled

over the problem of whether to be married in wartime. Its description became a pattern. Referred to Moreno by a superior officer, the trainee's drama is scripted in a published article on role analysis. For the student of Moreno's method it has the historical importance of being the paradigm, illuminating what is done on the stage, as well as what is said, in a psychodrama.

Zerka Toeman, subsequently Mrs. Moreno, was amanuensis to J. L. Moreno as long as he lived, but well before their marriage in 1949, she had also become a full collaborator. Her extended functions affected the note-taking. Trained as an auxiliary ego, she was often acting in the dramas. The shorthand notebook had to be put down as she moved to the stage and someone else was hastily recruited to take notes, or she later filled the gaps with her own recollections.

In 1949, the Morenos bought two wire recorders, then later tape recorders, and the notes on which scripts were based were put together in a different way. Greater fidelity was achieved in what could be heard and taping relieved the note-taker of recording dialog. Fuller descriptions of the action could be written. Mrs. Moreno was the transcriber of the tapes as they were supplemented with notes on the action. By 1954, professionally qualified, Mrs. Moreno was herself directing and the action notes were taken by Moreno when he was present, by staff or students when he was absent.

In 1968, the mental hospital was closed and Beacon became exclusively a training center. It was the same year in which Moreno gave up his own work as a psychodrama director. In the 32 years of the hospital's existence, virtually every psychodrama that he directed was noted.

Three films of Moreno working are in the Institute library. A movie camera was bought in 1948, but it soon disappeared, not to be replaced. Remaining extant is the screening of *Introduction to Psychodrama* in which Moreno demonstrates directorial techniques. Video equipment was installed in 1973 as a training aide. Moreno's directing psychodrama is preserved on two films both dated 1964: *Psychodrama and Group Psychotherapy in Action* and *Psychodrama of a Marriage*.

This latter film will be of especial interest to the researcher working with the scripts. As noted above, a script of this psychodrama was published in 1966. It is a copy of the film's sound track, reproduced on tape and typed for publication. Reading the script and viewing the film will reveal how much of what is occurring in a psychodrama is lost in a verbatim record. Movement, voice tones, facial expressions, body language and other non-verbalized happenings—all of which may be of greater significance than what is articulated—are not knowable even in this, the most faithful of the published scripts.

Zerka Moreno's careful estimate is that Moreno directed approximately 1,500 psychodramas and on each one some notes were taken. She estimates further that for some 150 of these dramas, the notes were transcribed and typescripts made. Moreno decided, with a view to their publication, which notes to have transcribed. But of these, only a limited number were ultimately published. (The manuscripts of unpublished scripts are now in Boston, Mass., as part of the Moreno Collection at the Francis Countway Memorial Library.)

Decisions on which dramas to have notes put into transcripts were made on Moreno's judgement of what was contemporaneously of the most consequence in disseminating understanding and acceptance of his method. He was concerned to make known the importance and effectiveness of role reversal, both for therapy and for applications. Many scripts illustrate the utility of reversing roles. As scientific questions arose on tele and empathy, he selected scripts which documented the theories he expounded in articles. As momentous events of the day occurred, he has scripted his direction of sociodramas centered on the Eichmann trial, the Harlem riots, the Presidential assassination, and such events. As various challenges of the method came to his attention, he selected notes for transcription which provided examples for his ripostes. As he experimented with new directional techniques he found fruitful, he chose some to be scripted.

But because it was never his central purpose to publish scripts tracing the historical development of the psychodramatic method from its elemental beginnings to the state in which he left it, the researcher cannot follow that evolution in the printed material. More of that development may be discerned in the Boston manuscripts, but significant lacunae remain.

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Address: Merlyn S. Pitzele
Executive Director
Moreno Institute
Beacon, NY 12508