

## 12. Soliloquies of the director: Interventions in a large group<sup>99</sup>

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### Introduction

Following various conversations with my colleagues, trainers and even my own students, I have become more and more aware of the urgent need for papers exploring psychodrama in its 'making'; the need of some reflection regarding the alternatives of directing in certain given situations. By allowing to follow various potential routes, the psychodrama methodology opens a wide spectrum of possibilities, and consequently needs a cartogram on which we can rely on in order to identify and evaluate routes already experimented with or to be experienced. This paper is an attempt to respond to this demand. I will present soliloquies of the director who, alone in the stage-wings and with the stage-lights dimmed, outlines his thoughts about the beginnings of the process of co-creation to be carried out, re-organises the project while in process, and evaluates it after it has finished. I will also follow his steps, feelings, doubts and 'new ideas' on the stage, while working with the group.

As it happens with all accounts written after the described event, the distance from the *status nascendi* of the event has allowed me to outline, for didactic purposes, the backdrop on which the director relied on when choosing one or another route or intervention.

### In the stage-wings

I am invited to coordinate a psychodrama introductory course during the study week of a psychology school. I start pondering about how to lead this work. As the event approaches and some of its details become clearer, some of the ideas I originally had in mind are transformed. One of these ideas was related to the number of around thirty participants that I suggested to the organisers. Their proposal (or rather demand) was to work with a group of one

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hundred people, as a great number of both students and professionals had expressed a strong interest in the course (the work takes place in a small city, a long way away from the big urbane psychodrama centres). Feeling motivated by this great interest and excited by the challenge of linking up theory and practice within a period of six hours to such a large group, I accept their proposal.

Regardless of the conditions, such as the ones described above for example, my first step of preparation is always led by some methodological questions that I will try to respond to. My answers can only be tentative though, as we are talking about an attempt to anticipate the reality I am going to face. What kind of group or gathering is this? What may be the expectations of the participants and which one of these will I be able to meet? This is part of my warm-up in the stage-wings for the roles of director and trainer, but it will also extend onto the stage through the activity to be concretized. These are moments of transition from the more general dramatic project established between the organisers of the event and the invited professional (who is already starting to develop his functions that will help him achieve the outlined objectives), to the more specific dramatic project (at this stage still in a process of 'unilateral' gestation) to be developed between the director/trainer and other, at this stage only virtual participants<sup>101</sup>.

Taking into account the peculiarities of the event I am about to describe, I find myself facing and trying to answer the same questions. It will be a gathering formed by various sub-groups (psychology students ranging from their first to fifth year, as well as already qualified psychologists). Therefore, I will need to think about the need of bringing this gathering as close as I possibly can to being a group: I will need to achieve a certain minimum level of complicity and participation involving all of us; clarity regarding the desired and supposedly common objectives; a certain degree of familiarity and integration among the members. This gathering consisting mainly of psychology students may reveal an eagerness of getting to know the method, as their demand for this mini-course demonstrates<sup>102</sup>. Being still in the stage-wings I cannot know the reason for their thirst, and consequently I cannot know either how to position myself in relation to it. I would need to be in the group context or on the stage to find out about it.

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<sup>101</sup> Unilateral is in inverted comas, as the virtual participants will influence the director's choices already at this stage. As Falivene Alves (2003) pointed it out, the dramatic project is always relational. In this case however, we may think that the general dramatic project (described as being developed between the organisers and the invited presenter) and the specific dramatic project (to be developed between the director and his virtual participants) are only preliminary stages linked to the sphere of expectations, and that these may or may not be effectively confirmed during the accomplishment of the dramatic project concretized in the micro-politics of the participants relationships. This being so, *pre-dramatic* project may be a more appropriate description of these initial phases of the work. Later on I will return to this idea.

<sup>102</sup> The hundred places for the course had been very quickly filled and even a waiting list was set up in case some people dropped out.

Based on the information I have, initially I think about a warm-up in which participants would be divided into sub-groups in order to get to know each other better. But many of them already know each other! What is a sufficient level of complicity that would result in the satisfactory development of a collective plot? After all, one of the pre-requisites of turning relationships permeated by telic ingredients into a dramatization in which conflicts can be worked through with creativity and spontaneity is to create a climate favourable for this by the use of warm-up. It would be interesting to experiment with different formations of sub-groups in order for everybody to have a chance to find out at least something about everybody else. This however, is impossible to be achieved in such a short time with a group of a hundred people. What may be viable is to have at least to rounds of sub-group formations.

On the other hand, it may be also important to map out the already formed and existing sub-groups, as this would provide us with a snapshot of our group cartogram to be outlined. This may serve as a starting point for the later development of the process: delineating the group identity in that particular moment based on sociometric guidelines. Working with the sense of belonging may contribute to the establishment of a certain degree of trust in relation to the work. This means identifying a familiar territory in order to later catch a glimpse of other possible ones that may be similar, not desired or imagined ones.

Taking this second perspective also into consideration, I think about two steps of divisions into sub-groups. The first one is the search for common identities and territories: first year students forming one sub-group, second year another, and so on. In the second step the sub-groups would be formed based on the criteria of people not knowing each other.

What are the tasks these sub-groups would face? In case of the sub-groups of people who don't know each other, some kind of introductions. What kind? It can't be something that will result in lengthy conversations, as this would jeopardise our two hours reserved for the experiential work itself, followed by another hour of technical and theoretical processing, in an attempt to offer some basic understanding of psychodrama. The actual time to be spent with the sub-groups will be determined by the aims we'll try to achieve by using them, as well as the size of the sub-groups. If we had larger sub-groups with around fifteen people in each, this may not make the development of the desired closer contacts viable. Having smaller sub-groups on the other hand, would increase the number of these, this resulting in the participants finding out very little about the diversity of the group as a whole. Having ten people in each sub-group seems a reasonable solution to me. In case of the sub-groups of people who already know each other the task would be to create something illustrating the identity that brings them together. This would already lead to a first round of self-presentations of one sub-group to the other. In the second step, in the sub-groups of participants who don't know each other, people would need to tell their names, year they are attending at university, or in case of those already qualified,

to say where and when they qualified. And in order to go beyond the merely bureaucratic bits of information, they would also each need to find a word that would express something about them.

But where would this warm-up lead to, beyond the desired forming of a group? What way will I choose to work with this group? At times like this, I rely again on my technical and theoretical knowledge in order to be guided into a direction where I feel more comfortable. Inviting them to identify a scene, character, image, sensation or feeling chosen by the group or that emerges from the group, is one of the ways that can help identify among the various themes present in the group the one that stands out most in that particular moment. (Contro, 2004 pp.115-117) Within the dramatic context this then may or may not become a protagonic theme<sup>103</sup>. Based on this chosen scene, image, sound or feeling, a character will then be created (this character may be closer or further away from the real life of the actor who will incorporate it) in order to facilitate the collective construction of a plot. Taking this into consideration, in case of the event described here, having two hours working time with a group of one hundred people, impels me to be as objective as possible, trying to aim for a constant clarity of our focus. Therefore, I may go straight for the development of a central character.

Having defined this character would mark the end of the warm-up phase. Beyond the necessary integration of the participants, a sense of group togetherness will be also achieved through the warm-up, and as a result of the request to create a character representing the group. Thus, in the first round of forming sub-groups by identification, each sub-group will represent a character that will distinguish them. In the second round of sub-groups formed by participants who don't know each other, another instruction will be given following their introductions. They will be asked to complete the following phrase: 'If I was to tell a story today, my central character would be...' Then, each sub-group will choose someone to represent their character, as we know that these choices are never just accidental. This is another phase when we use some kind of criteria. In most of the cases groups usually choose the person who suggested the character most of them can relate to, this person in some way being the one mostly warmed-up to appropriately sum up the inter-relational fluxes within the group. In case the chosen person is not available to play the character, someone else will usually step in demonstrating another kind of warmed-upness, namely the readiness to be an actor, which then will be made use of.

Having ten sub-groups will lead to ten characters. Each will be duly introduced and presented to the audience, who will then choose the one that will initially lead to the development of our plot. There is nothing else I can plan for

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<sup>103</sup> The editor's note: For more details on the protagonic theme see Falivene Alves's (1999) chapter in Figusch, Z. *Sambadrama - The Arena of Brazilian Psychodrama*, London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2005, pp.130-140.

what will follow from there. We have arrived to the strange beauty of improvised theatre.

All what is left is to plan the second half of the mini-course that will take place in the afternoon. I believe that continuing with the same format as used in the morning (experience followed by processing) would be interesting, as it would enable a new dialogue between theory and practice. I assume that by the afternoon this gathering of people would become more of a group, being more warmed-up for the work and presenting more integration among the members. Hopefully, they will be also a bit more trusting of me, all this allowing us to follow a different direction during this second, afternoon phase. Who knows, we may arrive to a scene or story from one of the participants' life that would symbolise one of the significant themes that are around in the group. This could be a possibility. It would be another way of demonstrating the use of psychodrama. I'll keep that in mind!

### **On the stage**

Up until now – in the morning session – nothing has made me change the course of direction of what I have originally planned. We arrived to ten characters, Joan D'Arc being one of them.

The scene involves the heroine and a woodcutter who has come to be paid for a job he had done for her. However, she does not want to pay him. Their dialogue gets stuck and neither of them wants to change their positions. I take the author/actress (Contro 2004, p.28) out into the mirror position in order to explore different alternatives, and she immediately, after moving out of the dramatic context and without any questioning from me, realises that the represented scene is a reproduction of an event from her real life. She doesn't say what event this is, but becomes emotional and stands slightly behind me, as if she wanted to hide from the audience. I check out with her my perception that this is something she does not feel at ease to share with the group. As she agrees, I turn to the audience in order to avoid their cooling down and not to lose the 'fine thread' that interlinks the social, group and dramatic context. Looking back at this moment from after the event, I think that beyond being an opportunity to offer psychodramatic pointers to the students, this was also another moment of soliloquy for me as a director, when I was looking for theoretical and technical resources on which I could rely on in order to find new alternatives in response to the impasse brought to us by the author/actress of our plot. She was representing the hesitation of us all, whether to continue with this scene originating from the social context, represented within the dramatic context, and then through the use of the 'mirror' observed from the group context. Within those few brief seconds the theme of 'fear of being exposed' was concretised. This was the challenge to be overcome.

I believe that it wasn't a wasted moment, as my comments to the group regarding the different contexts, although at first tentative, have actually led to the answer. In the surplus reality of the dramatic context, while something private may have been exposed by becoming public, this private thing was also protected by being dressed up into a character. Thus, the possibility of further developing the plot emerged, this being fuelled by our actress's repertoire of life, but under the mantle of a fictitious story. Added to this, during that moment of hesitation, it also appeared to me, that in spite of having only spent a short time together, there was a certain degree of trust from her (actress) and the audience of our relationship. I suggested that we carry on experimenting with the scene from the character's point of view, however, without the actress needing to make any references to her private story, and also assuring her that we will work carefully and if she at any point decided to interrupt the story we are creating, her wish will be respected.

With her agreement we return to the scene. Not for long however. The story develops permeated by ethical and moral questions regarding the woodcutter's work and whether there is or isn't an obligation to pay him; is there indebtedness or not? Did he do his job as expected? Despite trying out different variations, the conflict, duality and collision between the two antagonists persist. Our author/actress indicates that she is at her limits. I make another proposal to the group. Looking back at this moment in hindsight, I see this proposal as an important pointer that gave me direction within the psychodrama methodology, a pointer to collective creation. This proposal was based on the concept of the protagonist, and the idea that if the chosen character and scene are truly representative of the group involved (Falivene Alves 1999), then we can explore this with different authors/actors, thus gaining a wider range of perspectives regarding the theme under examination. We maintain the same scene with different actors rotating, as long as the audience is also interested in participating and developing something new, or in further deepening certain aspects of the presented relationship dynamics. Variations on the same theme until the group feel satisfied. So this is what we do.

This is followed by group members sharing their identifications with or feelings related to what the protagonisation has revealed or aroused. Finally, we have an explanatory lecture, guided by the processing of the event.

### **In the stage-wings between two acts**

During the break between the two sessions I feel uncomfortable with what I had previously planned for the afternoon. Is the 'fear of being exposed' a message from the group regarding how I should lead the rest of the work? Could this be the central theme that permeates the group? Encouraging the emergence

of one of the participants' private story in order to be represented could go against this message. What other route may I be able to explore?

These questions are aimed to better outline my role of director and to better understand the functions that I should focus on at this particular moment. We have come together with the objective that the participants find out a bit about psychodrama. This is our project. I return to one of my previous soliloquies from my preparation for the event: *'This gathering consisting mainly of psychology students may reveal an eagerness of getting to know the method, as their demand for this mini-course demonstrates. Being still in the stage-wings I cannot know the reason for their thirst, and consequently I cannot know either how to position myself in relation to it. I would need to be in the group context or on the stage to find out about it.'* This interest for psychodrama is a theme that still has not been clearly outlined, but which certainly permeates the whole group.

In order not to follow a path that may lead to making someone feel exposed, it could be more adequate to focus on sociodramatic aspects. How about identifying what the participants have got in touch with during the morning session in order to maintain the continuity of the work? We could work with the emergent group theme (thinking again about the protagonic theme), but this time, instead of exploring this through a character, we could use images. This is another way of demonstrating basic instrumental alternatives to the group.

### **Back on the stage**

With the aim of achieving better integration, I instruct the group to outline the most significant impressions resulting from our work in the morning. Images emerge from the ten reunited subgroups (the subgroups that formed based on the criteria of knowing very little about each other). When asked to choose one of these images, we are presented with the image of a pair of scales, its two trays representing the dichotomy between reason and emotion. We explore this image by different actors taking on the role of the scales and experimenting with the relationship and dialogue between its two trays; we arrive to the conclusion that there is a central dichotomy splitting the group at that particular moment. In the two trays of the scale are psychodrama and psychoanalysis, each one telling us and justifying why they should weigh more. Emotion and reason, known and unknown are some of the other dichotomies, reminding us again of the polarities.

This reminds me of the old contraposition Moreno made regarding the same subject (psychodrama vs. psychoanalysis), this displeasing me slightly as we are reproducing old discussions. However, as the group consists mainly of psychology students, I reconcile myself thinking that for them this is a new issue. This is where this particular group is at the moment, and this is their central need. With these thoughts in mind I suggest that we creatively look for

alternative ways of playing with these polarities. The image goes through various transformations as we identify similarities, new differences, areas of connection and distance between these polarities. We arrive to the conclusion that neither psychodrama nor psychoanalysis is right or wrong, as when choosing one over the other we make these choices in terms of paradigmatic, ideological and other kinds of identifications.

I feel pleased as we arrive to the sharing, as we managed to encompass the protagonic theme through a more sociodramatic focus; my satisfaction is shared by the more senior students and the already qualified psychologists. I find out however, while sharing with the group my decisions made in the break between the two acts, that although afraid of being exposed by it, the younger students have had the expectation of seeing a more 'psychodramatic' act taking place. According to some of their testimonies, this would have been a chance to see psychodrama applied in a psychotherapeutic proposal, and through this they could have gained another kind of knowledge that could distinguish psychodrama from psychoanalysis. Again I feel a certain degree of disappointment due to my expectations that the event should reach an ending that would be satisfying for all participants. However, I need to take into consideration the participants' great heterogeneity of knowledge and experiences. I also remind myself that it was me who accepted the challenge of running a course under these circumstances. Therefore, once again I have to try to consider at least some of these needs. As we are approaching the end of the experiential part and the beginning of the lecture that follows this, I suggest that we explore some of these issues further within the lecture; and this is what we do.

### **In the stage-wings after the event**

Even after all my considerations regarding the reasons for the dissatisfaction of some participants at the end of the event, their dissatisfaction continues to bother me. Was there something missing during the unfolding of the event that, despite of the prevailing natural heterogeneity of the participants, may have led to a more homogenous sense of a positive outcome? Would it have satisfied the expectations of a greater number of people, if I had followed my initial proposal of working with scenes and stories from the participants' private lives? Or is it my good old narcissism that does not leave me in peace, being extremely exigent and wanting everybody's constant recognition? Knowing myself a bit, the probability of the answer being 'yes' to this last question is quite high. The other questions, beyond of needing an answer or collective answers, belong to the realm of predictions and prophesy, an area that I know nothing about.



However, something within these soliloquies is starting to make sense. The expression '*if I had followed my initial proposal*' opens up a space, where I can, at least partly, locate the reason for my uneasiness.

It is clear to me that when working with psychodrama tools, we do not create anything on our own. We certainly play our part, but always in a dialogue with the other participants. In other words, it is the director's task to recognise that the group is asking for the continuity of the work to be maintained without exposing anyone, and to find alternatives for achieving this. Therefore, not having checked this assumption out with the group meant that I relied exclusively on my own perception. And even if the group had not been aware of their real needs at that point, I could have offered them the two options, so they could have made a collective decision. In this way, we could have felt jointly responsible for the direction we had chosen. And theoretically, given the heterogeneity of this group, if a choice had been made, this could have also reduced the number of expectations the group wanted to simultaneously consider.

To further consolidate this reflection, I again return to the concept of the dramatic project. I would like to dispel the confusion often associated with this concept resulting from the statement that 'the director's dramatic project' is exclusive and individual, and would like to clarify that the dramatic project is a collective creation that interlinks the different roles, its objective being to achieve a commonly outlined project. I would like to stress that the dramatic project never happens in an exclusively individual way (that is, it is never the *director's* dramatic project), as already in the first stage of the process (the pre-project) the dramatic project is established and developed in relation with those who buy our services; while in the phase of the director's warm-up and preparation, it is developed in relation with his still virtual partners. Within both these phases (pre-project and warm-up) as well as the transition between them, the expectations of both sides involved are elucidated or inferred. Ignoring these would mean to disregard aspects of the dynamics that are already present at these early stages, and consequently creating possible blind-spots. Therefore the denomination 'pre-project' stresses the importance of these early stages of the dramatic project, related to the elaboration of the contract and its latter fulfilment.

In other words, as a tool, the dramatic project extrapolates the surroundings of the dramatic context. It aims to transit between the social, group and dramatic contexts. The example I am referring to: in the social context of the stage-wings 'between the acts', in spite of having tried to understand the group dynamics manifest during the morning session, I did not fully take into consideration the contributions of my interlocutors, which could have been put into practice while creating the group context of the next act. The dramatic project continues to exist in the stage-wings, even if the actors, audience and director are momentarily not together. The play reverberates even when there is nothing yet to be enacted.

Although somewhat calmer, my uneasiness still continues.

There is a message still to be clarified in the phrase '*According to some of their testimonies, this would have been a chance to see psychodrama applied in a psychotherapeutic proposal, and through this they could have gained another kind of knowledge that could distinguish psychodrama from psychoanalysis.*' Maybe in order to be able to choose, through identification, one or the other path, first it is necessary to become familiar with both of them. Therefore, there were good reasons for the more junior students' dissatisfaction expressed in the above phrase. As it happens, there could have been various 'different ways' of considering their expectations. I could have more strongly emphasised the possibilities and potential sociodrama has as a specific psychodramatic resource. In hindsight I also realise that when closing the experiential part of the afternoon session I did not make enough connections to the theme that was running through our work during the whole day. After all, I started this afternoon session with the instruction to '*outline the most significant impressions resulting from our work in the morning*', that is, I intended to thematically link the process together.

And thinking back at further links that could have been considered, I realise that we used an institutional perspective in the choices we made (based on personal identification) between psychodrama and psychoanalysis, this being only one of the possible angles we can look at this issue. The lacking knowledge of students regarding the psychodrama method (hence their great interest for the mini-course and their difficulty in establishing certain types of comparisons in order to structure their knowledge) is due mainly to the fact that their training institution did not offer opportunities like this workshop on a regular basis. The great demand for this mini-course is due to the fact that within the psychology curriculum psychoanalysis has an almost monopolized position in relation to other modalities. The university provides a training towards which students have a critical attitude for being incomplete, as this was demonstrated in the scene that emerged during our morning session: the woodcutter carries out a job that Joan D'Arc (representing the students) is reluctant to acknowledge.

Had I decided to further explore this territory, I still would have not had any guarantee to 'completely satisfy' the students. However, this again is only just speculation; the realm of predictions and prophesy. But, it would have been a path which could have led us to a better understanding of how the method (through the use of sociodrama) can contribute to reveal the dynamics of personal relationships, in this case the students' relationship with the training organisation. Having suggested to try and find a more satisfactory way of arriving to the conceived final image ('*to arrive to the conclusion that neither psychodrama nor psychoanalysis is right or wrong, as when choosing one over the other we make these choices in terms of paradigmatic, ideological and other kinds of identifications*'), was an example of co-creation through which we reached a momentary resolution of a predominantly individual character. We did not

pursue the more collective perspective of identifications through belonging to student groups, this also including the already qualified professionals.

My inclination to consider this collective perspective as both necessary and complementary is due to following reason: in my practice I try to avoid processes where an alienated character could be attacked. In the trenches of the individual the collective forces tend to stagger.

I think that the protagonic theme (Contro 2004, p.38) - the impasse related to the limitations of the institution's curriculum - composed of different correlated themes (the fear of being exposed and the need to learn about other approaches), wasn't fully explored. As it was present throughout the whole of the developing plot, identifying the protagonic theme could have helped us outline the cartogram in construction (or the already existing one) and could have offered more direction, understanding and guidance.

What could have blinded me not to see this perspective at the time? It could be the fact that my initial contacts in preparation for this work were with the president of the academic department and with the course coordinator, who were both very welcoming of me. In relation to them I may have slipped into the complementary role of someone intimidated and not wanting to get in conflict with the organisation. In other words, I may have been contaminated by the 'fear of being exposed' (correlated theme). It may be also to do with the fact that the information regarding psychodrama and other therapeutic approaches not being part of the curriculum during the initial phases of the psychology course (protagonic theme) was given to me in form of passing comments in the stage-wings.

As we have seen, the stage-wings - even if they are in the shadows - are an essential part of the spectacle. The pre-project is inherent to and inseparable from the dramatic project. Not paying attention to what happens in the stage-wings and during the pre-project may lead to losing sight of aspects that are important, but may not be fundamental for the quality of what is being co-created. These are aspect such as the starting of rehearsals, the preparation for playing characters, establishing the participants' common objectives and all their different expectations that may be around. It is part of the director's role to take all this into consideration as live and pulsating components of the picture, symphony, or play to be composed. It is art in the process of being created.

Having identified these further causes of my uneasiness, I can momentarily leave it to rest. This short piece of processing of the events in the stage-wings will help me do the fine tuning for future interventions.

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