Blatner, A. (1996). The Action. In *Acting In*. (Ch.5, pp.64-93) Springer.

5

The Action

Following the warm-up of the group and the selection of the protagonist, the psychodramatic process enters its second phase, the *action,* which involves the exploration of the protagonist's problem. The logic of the progress of scenes in a classical psychodrama has been illustrated in a diagram (Figure 5.1) developed by Goldman and Morrison (1984). This "psychodramatic spiral" shows the shifting of location and time of scenes used in exploring a typical problem.

While every psychodramatic enactment is unique, in general the action will start with an enactment of some aspect of the present situation, in an attempt to help the protagonist also express the underlying feelings and thoughts that accompany his behavior. Then other scenes are played, either in different relationships or, more often, in the past, which also reveal common concerns or patterns. Then the action moves into scenes that may have given rise to the basic attitudes and reactions that seem to be problematical for the protagonist.

In portraying core conflicts, protagonists often reexperience the original emotions of grief, fear, anger, longing, shame, guilt, or confusion. Expression of these feelings involve a process of catharsis (Blatner, 1985a). The challenge is then to help the protagonist find ways of constructively re-owning feelings which may have been repressed. Scenes involving expression of more vulnerable feelings need to be followed by scenes bringing forth feelings of effectiveness and hope. This two-stage process explains Moreno's dictum, "every catharsis of abreaction should be followed by a

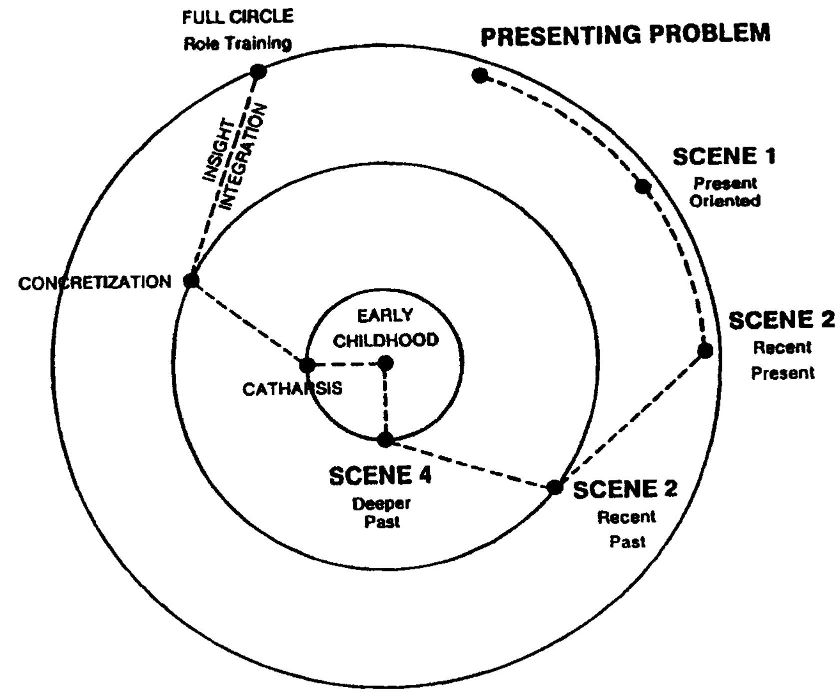

Figure 5.1

catharsis of integration," in which the protagonist reclaims some of the vitality and power associated with previously disowned aspects of self.

These phases of the process are illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 5.1 as the protagonist is helped to "spiral in" towards an elucidation of the "core" issues and then "spiral out" while applying those insights in expanding or training more appropriate role behaviors. The integration process, discussed in the next chapter, can involve a number of scenes which help consolidate gains through behavioral rehearsal. Or, further elements of "unfinished business" may be brought to the surface for psychodramatic exploration. Since each protagonist's situation has its own individual elements, there are no hard and fast rules about the sequence of scenes.

PRESENTATION OF THE PROBLEM

When the protagonist is selected, he is brought toward the stage and encouraged to describe his situation. As the director discusses the protagonist's problem, a specific example is sought. If the protagonist begins to narrate the situation, the director encourages him to portray the scene, rather than talk about what happened (Figure 5.2). In the following vignette, the protagonist, whose name is Joe, will be helped to psychodramatically explore a personal situation in his life. Joe begins to tell the director and group about it:

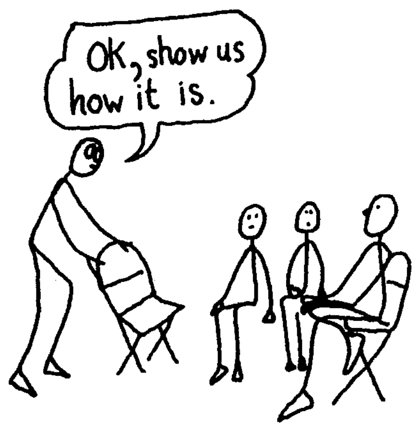

Figure 5.2

Joe: Well, I had this fight with my boss.

Director: Show us, don't tell us. (The director gets up and invites Joe into the stage area.) Where does the scene happen?

Joe: It was in the office.

Director: It *is* in the office—it's happening now! Let's see the office. Where is the boss's chair? ..desk? ..Are you sitting or standing? (Figure 5.3)

The director (who in the stick figure illustrations wears glasses) continues to speak as if the situation were occurring in the here-and-now, which brings a greater degree of immediacy to the process. The director both models speaking in the present tense

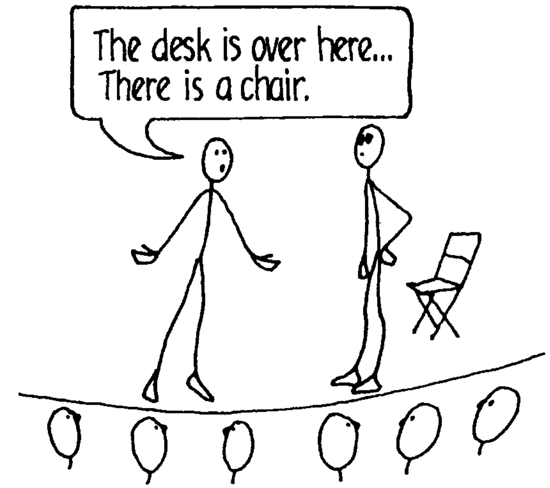

Figure 5.3

and reminds the protagonist to do so. This redirection may have to be repeated several times, because protagonists often lapse into narrating the situation as if it were in the past or in the subjunctive sense, that is, how it "might" be, or, "maybe would be." These are subtle linguistic distancing maneuvers, very common in our culture, but they interfere with people's experiencing clarity in their action, thinking, and deciding. With encouragement, protagonists often become warmed-up and involved, suspending much (but not all) of the awareness that they are is "just pretending.".

The director has the protagonist move around the stage, visualizing the scene in its particulars. As the protagonist describes the scene, the director asks him to amplify the descriptions, to physically point out the furniture, "feel" the textures of the materials, note the colors, the temperature, the weather—all concrete sensations that immerse him even more deeply in the enactment. In other words, the sensory immersion techniques of the great acting teacher and director Konstantin Stanislavski also have some relevance to the process of helping a protagonist warm up to a scene (Lippe, 1992). The setting of the stage is for the protagonist's benefit as much as for the audience's. It may be as brief or prolonged as the director feels is necessary in order to maximize the protagonist's continuing warm-up.

The physical involvement of setting up the props, moving the chairs or tables into place, or putting on a piece of fabric as a shawl or gown can further the warming-up process. And as the enactment progresses, the director should attempt to maintain an optimal level of actual movement in order to avoid becoming bogged down in a wordy interaction (one of the most common pitfalls of directing). Later in the psychodrama, the director continues to use a variety of scene changes, role reversals, standing on chairs, pushing, climbing over furniture, and many other techniques in order to keep up the pace of action.

BRINGING IN THE AUXILIARY

As the scene is set, the auxiliaries are chosen and encouraged to move immediately into their roles. Joe is asked to pick someone in the group (call him Bill) to be the auxiliary (Figure 5.4).

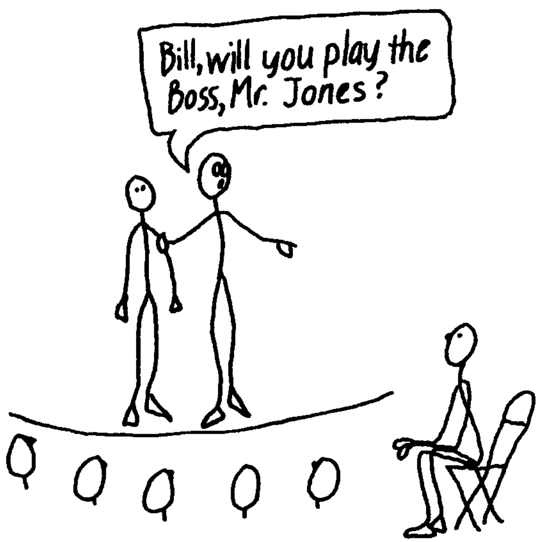

Figure 5.4

Bill comes on stage and the director immediately warms him up to his role:

DIRECTOR: Mr. Jones, you asked Joe to come in today. He can't hear you right now. As if you were just thinking out loud to yourself, giving a soliloquy, let's hear what you have to say regarding why you want to see him.

AUXILIARY: (Bill, as Mr. Jones) Well, Joe hasn't been performing very well at his job. (Figure 5.5).

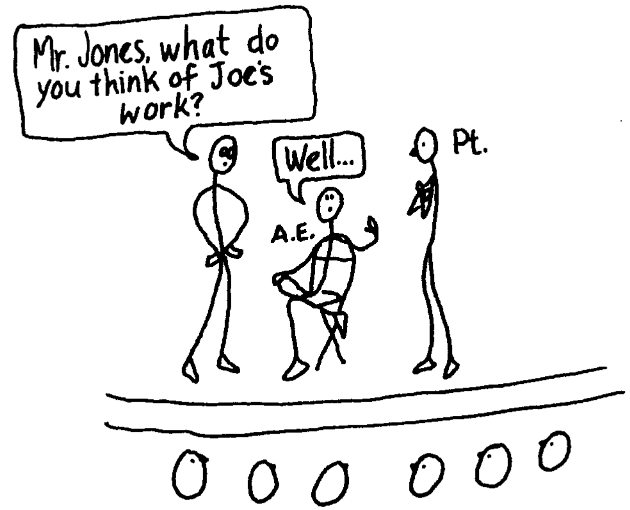

Figure 5.5

DIRECTOR: (glancing at Joe) Is that right?

JOE: No, that's not it. My work is fine.

DIRECTOR: Change parts—that is, reverse roles. Joe, be Mr. Jones and begin the encounter.

JOE: (as Mr. Jones) Look, Joe, this is the third time this week you've come in late.

DIRECTOR: Change parts and start again. Mr. Jones? (Aside to Bill as auxiliary, warming him up). Repeat the last line.

AUXILIARY: (Mr. Jones) Look Joe, this is the third time this week you've come in late.

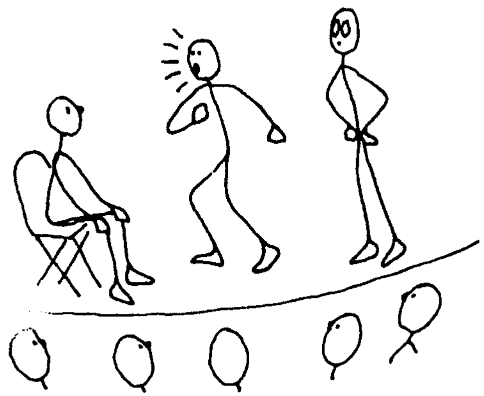

Figure 5.6

JOE: But, Sir, when I took this job, we agreed that because of my having to take care of my kids my work time would be adjusted! (Figure 5.6).

AUXILIARY: Well, your co-workers are noticing and complaining.

The issues are unfolding. If the auxiliary does not play his part as the protagonist visualizes its essential quality, further role reversals are used to guide the auxiliary toward a more accurate role portrayal. If the protagonist tends to narrate to the director or audience, the auxiliary should address him in-role:

AUXILIARY: You're talking as if I'm not even here! What's the big idea of being so late this morning?!

If the protagonist becomes lost in intellectualization or confused as to his feelings, there are some other techniques that may be used:

- *Accentuate the non-verbal communications.* Have the protagonist enact the scene without using actual words, but rather with exaggerated vocal tone, inflection, rhythm, and accompanying facial expressions and physical gestures. This technique of using sounds without words ("blah-blah" or more complex pronunciations of nonsense syllables) is also called "gibberish." Through the action, the underlying emotion is expressed more clearly.

- *Soliloquy.* The protagonist is instructed to walk up and down and talk to himself out loud, in order to clarify his feelings. He can then reenter the interaction with the auxiliary in role.
- *Double.* If the protagonist has difficulty expressing his emotions clearly, a double may be brought in, an auxiliary who, as described in Chapter 3, will portray Joe's inner feelings (Figure 5.7):

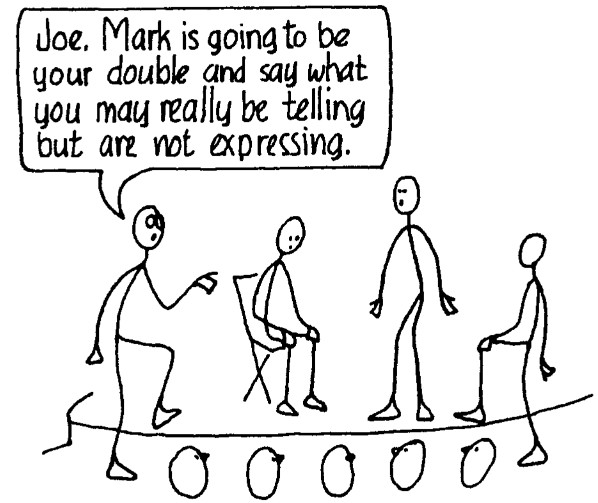

Figure 5.7

DIRECTOR: Mark, will you come in here. (Gives instructions for doubling, then carries on with the scene.)

JOE: (continuing) Well, Sir, I think that wasn't our agreement.

MR. JONES: Look, Joe, we have to run a business here.

DOUBLE: Look, you bastard, here's how I really feel: #@%$!! (Figure 5.8)

JOE: (nodding) Yeah! You can't push me around like this!

MR. JONES: Now hold on there!

DOUBLE: It's about time someone was frank with you! When you make an agreement—

JOE: Yeah, you have to stand by what you say!

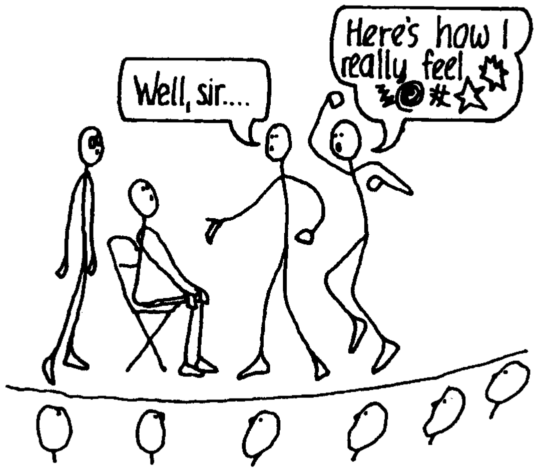

Figure 5.8

From this point, the interaction can be continued, or replayed, or the scene shifted and a related interaction portrayed. If Joe has problems with authority, many other encounters with authority figures can be explored, always moving to more central emotional issues.

MOVING FROM PERIPHERAL TO CENTRAL

In general, people cannot tease out the essential elements in a complex welter of emotions. Layers of self-justifications and self-reproach, explanations and excuses to others, difficulty in differentiating between the actual circumstances and one's beliefs or emotional reactions to events, and similar dynamics make it impossible to develop a clear insight into the basic issues involved. Yet there is an act hunger to express and explore personally meaningful experience. Thus, it's all right to begin with some superficial event, even one which the director may feel is peripheral to more "core" conflicts.

Some therapists may see presentations of such peripheral issues as avoidance, a kind of resistance, but in fact even these enactments can serve as sources of ideas fostering the warming-up process. Furthermore, it is an act of respect and wisdom to consider that the protagonist's unconscious may be trying to symbolically help rather than hinder. In other words, good directors go along with their protagonists rather than fight them.

For example, if the protagonist has difficulty in dealing with an emotionally loaded conflict with his mother, he may be helped to enact a similar situation with a saleslady. Another technique is to have the protagonist play the role of his own brother or sister, and to enact with his mother from that position. Marguerite Parrish (1953) wrote about the following two useful techniques:

The substitute role technique is frequently used and is helpful when working with protagonists who tend to be suspicious and resist portraying themselves on the stage. This technique was successfully used with a middle-aged woman diagnosed as having involutional melancholia with some paranoid traits. She was unable to enact her own situations and so was asked to play the role of her mother, who operated a boarding house. In this role she was at ease and seemed to enjoy going on the stage. During the third session the protagonist brought up the fact that one of her roomers was promiscuous. This story was also her own story. As a young girl her illegitimate pregnancy was followed by an abortion, and as she approached middle life she worried about this incident and felt sure her family would find out and would no longer love her. Psychodrama gave this women an opportunity to freely express her feelings about the incident, and the discussion of the audience helped her to see that she had the love of her family and would not necessarily lose it because of the past event.

In the *symbolic distance* technique the protagonist enacts a role very different from his own role and is gradually led to portray his own role. This technique is particularly valuable when working with children. A young boy and girl from broken and inadequate homes were treated in this way. Individual therapy had been helpful and outward behavior improved, but the children were afraid to leave the security of the hospital, for they felt sure they could not get along in a home situation. Because the problems of these children were so alike, they were cast as brother and sister and were treated together. Following the portrayals, the group discussed why the children acted differently in the various situations. From these scenes the children finally came to realize that they could get along in some types of family homes and expressed willingness to accept a family care situation.

If the protagonist tends to speak in terms of abstractions, concepts can be made concrete by symbolizing them as figures with their own personalities: "They," "society," "other people," "the establishment," and "young people" all can be portrayed by an auxiliary. "This woman is the Establishment. Talk to her now." The protagonist is directed to confront the auxiliary and eventually role-reverse with her, all of which brings the protagonist's conflicts into sharper focus.

FOCUSING ON THE NONVERBAL

One of the most useful approaches in clarifying the protagonist's problem is the emphasis on explicitly portraying the nonverbal communication involved, e.g.:

JOE: (protagonist) But Sir, you *said* you would.

DIRECTOR: Joe, step out of the scene. Mark (another group member), replay that interaction, acting the exact way Joe behaves (*mirror* technique).

The director asks Mark to shift out of the role of double and to take the role of the mirror. (Note: Any person participating in the enactment, except the director and protagonist, is designated by the general term *auxiliary*.) Figure 5.9 illustrates the scene that ensues:

MARK: (Auxiliary ego, whining dramatically) But Sir, you *said* you would!

JOE: Wow! Do I whine like that?

DIRECTOR: (to group) Is Mark's presentation fair? (Group agrees.) Well, Joe, with whom did you "whine" as a child?

JOE: To my father, when he . . .

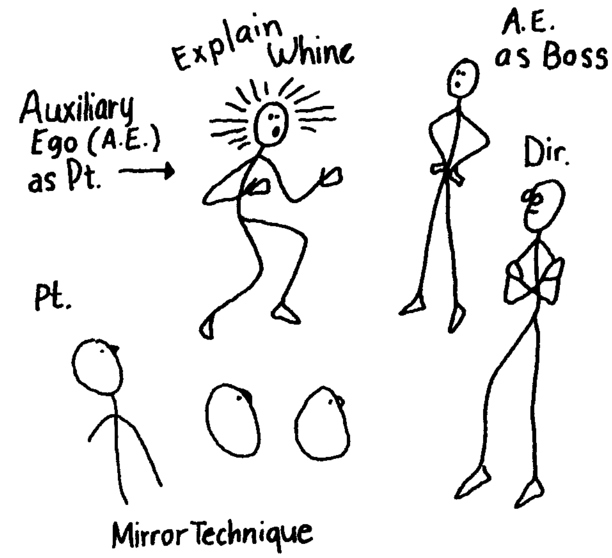

Figure 5.9

Often what is said in an interaction (the content) is less important than how it is said (the process). The dramatization of the expression, posture, tone of voice, angle of the body, and gesture all help bring out the factors that may have been the major determinants of the other person's reaction.

Body postures and other elements of nonverbal behavior communicate not only to other people, but also serve to cue or reinforce personal attitudinal systems. Thus, the stance and other correlations of whining behavior tend to reinforce a disempowered feeling and associated beliefs, while a provocative habit of posture or expression may promote a non-self-reflective attitude of self-righteousness.

Role reversal, observations from the audience, and the amplification of gesture, as well as the mirror technique, help the protagonist and group become more aware of the nature and importance of the nonverbal communication being portrayed in the interaction.

EXPLORING UNEXPRESSED EMOTIONS

Whether in psychotherapy or in a class on social problems, one of the challenges of consciousness raising is helping people become more self-aware. In this sense, psychodrama is a way of operationalizing Socrates' dictum, "Know thyself." That people are complex and self-deceptive is the major finding of dynamic psychology, whatever the particulars of the various schools of thought. How then to reduce this self-deception, to increase the awareness of the whole range of attitudes and ideas which may be influencing the people in a problematic situation? A further challenge is to more finely discriminate the issues involving the specific underlying assumptions and beliefs which may operate unconsciously in most people's life.

Psychodrama utilizes the integration of imagination and action with more traditional, verbal forms of self-reflection. In psychodrama, the realm of imagination is recognized as being a powerful dimension. By shifting from a passively visualized fantasy to a dimension in which events are concretized in enactment, this approach opens a new context for reexperiencing and reworking the meaning and emotional impact of experience.

Moreno believed that the realm in which imagination can be made manifest, phenomenological reality, deserves to be recognized as a definite category of existence. He named this ontological dimension *surplus reality* (Moreno, 1965). The value of this concept is that it validates as a dimension of being worthy of being taken seriously and explored those experiences of events that not only have occurred in the past, and may occur in the future, but also events that never occur—even events that could never happen!—such as an encounter with an unborn child, speaking with a relative who has died, replaying a scene so that one experiences mastery instead of humiliation, or having a dialogue with one's patron saint or guardian angel. Surplus reality scenes allow the whole range of the vehicle of drama to be fully utilized in the service of people discovering the deeper aspects of their own thoughts and feelings.

In the action of psychodrama, then, scenes are constructed which bring forth the protagonist's hopes, fears, expectations,

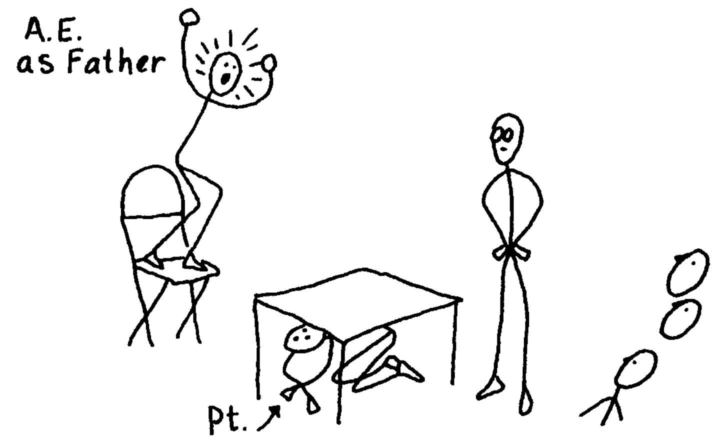

Figure 5.10

unexpressed resentments, projections, internalizations, and judgmental attitudes. Furthermore, the protagonist is helped to ventilate these feelings and symbolically live through them. In the case of the example being used in this chapter, Joe's muted conversation with the boss is converted into an emotional confrontation with the help of the expressive double.

As the scenes are changed to deal with other authority conflicts, a variety of techniques can be used to intensify the expression of feelings. Height may be used to exaggerate a dominance-submission gradient. For example, in a scene between Joe and his father, the auxiliary playing the father may be directed to stand on a chair, and even further, Joe could kneel or curl up on the floor to reflect the feeling of "You're so big and I'm so small." On the other hand, in another scene, the disadvantage can be shifted by having Joe deal with his feared father by standing on the chair, compensating for the earlier sense of imbalance in status or personal power (Figure 5.10). Using the gradient of height is often helpful as an aid in assertion training.

Manipulating other physical elements in the scene, such as adding some patronizing head patting, prodding, or even physical pushing, can sometimes be a catalyst to a catharsis, but such activities must be applied with caution and experience. Protagonists shouldn't be overloaded, but a degree of confrontation may evoke a decision for self-empowerment and counter-confrontation.

Directors should avoid overemphasizing only the negative, angry feelings which, in many cases, are mixed with a desire for a more positive and caring relationship. This desire may evoke even more vulnerability (and thus be repressed) than the anger. And for some people, anger comes too easily; the psychodramatist's challenge lies in helping them to learn to modulate the anger.

MOVING WITH THE RESISTANCES

One major challenge of psychotherapy or psychodrama is of helping the protagonist find a way to examine those inner feelings that threaten his sense of mastery or self-esteem. He may employ a wide range of resistances in order to avoid facing unpleasant experiences. I find that if the director works with the resistances, she can often find a way to gradually explore the deeper conflicts. Moreno puts it this way: "We don't tear down the protagonist's walls; rather, we simply try some of the handles on the many doors, and see which one opens."

When resistances become apparent, there are several steps to be taken. First, ground the protagonist in the purpose of the activity and the safety of the group and its process. Second, validate the hesitancy, help it find an explicit voice. Use doubling to further give words to this tension. For example, Joe stands transfixed as he begins to think about his father.

DOUBLE: This is very hard for me. I'm not sure I want to talk about this.

JOE: Yes, I feel very tense. (The director then has the opportunity to support Joe in his fear.)

DIRECTOR: Being honest with someone so close is difficult. Here, in psychodrama, we can face the challenge. It involves taking a risk, but it won't be overwhelming.

If the resistance is being acted out through a subconscious habit of becoming more elusive, make that avoidance more explicit, exaggerate the avoidance maneuver. For example, a resistance expressed in the tendency to explain may be portrayed openly by the director's asking the protagonist to talk to the group, to "explain" his position for one minute.

Reframing elusive phrases can remind protagonists of their own power. For example, the statement "I can't *seem* to" may be agreed with, but subtly redefined by the double or the director as, "I *won't*." "I don't know" can be reshaped as "I don't want to think about that." "Why do I have to do this?" can be restated as, "I don't like doing this." "It's no use" may be supported, but qualified with a statement of the temporary nature of the present resistance. "*Right now* I see no way out."

The point of going with the resistances is that through the explicit portrayal of the defenses, the protagonist becomes more fully aware that he is *choosing* to use a defense, that is, the portrayal increases his awareness of his own responsibility for his behavior and sense of mastery over his habitual behavior patterns. The more a protagonist can allow himself, with the support of the director, to say no, the sooner he begins to feel free to say yes when he is ready.

With a protagonist who is becoming overly anxious while dealing with a problem, it is often appropriate to allow him to move away from the core conflict, to obtain some distance. The move from peripheral issues toward central issues described earlier can be temporarily reversed.

A major block in many protagonists is use of the defense mechanism of isolation of affect—they are not even aware that they are feeling any emotion. The first step in dealing with this resistance is to help the protagonist become aware of the experience of emotion within himself. Only when he is moved toward an attempt to identify the quality of the feeling can he go on to explore the meaning of his emotions. In dealing with sensitizing a protagonist to his own feelings, the director focuses on (a) the protagonist's nonverbal communications and (b) his *imagery*. These two "avenues to the unconscious" bypass the most common forms of resistance: intellectualization, vagueness, explanation, rationalization, abstraction, and circumstantiality.

The protagonist's nonverbal communication is dramatized by treating the parts of the protagonist as if they were active beings in themselves. Areas of tension in the body, tightness of the voice, gripping of the hands all can be enacted as a little encounter between different parts of the self, for example:

JOE: (to his "father") Daddy, why don't you—
DIRECTOR: Joe, what is your voice doing?
JOE: It's choked.
DIRECTOR: Now become the part that's strangling the throat!
JOE: (as throat) I'm being squeezed and strangled!
DIRECTOR: Now become the part that's strangling the throat!
JOE: (as strangler, rasping) Shut up, you S.O.B., or you'll get us all into trouble! (twists his hands in a wringing motion).

This approach, like dream work, is used in Gestalt therapy and psychosynthesis. Working with dreams can be an important approach for healing (Leutz, 1986; Nolte, Weistart, & Wyatt, 1977). This method, too, utilizes the power of metaphor generated by the protagonist's unconscious symbolizing ability.

The use of the imagery is another avenue to the identification of deeper feelings. The different figures in a nightmare, hallucination, or a guided fantasy can interact using psychodramatic methods, and this can often clarify the nature of the protagonist's internal complexes, that is, the conglomerations of attitudes, images, and emotions.

Dealing with a protagonist's resistances is the core of psychotherapy or psychodrama. The art of the director is tested nowhere more than in this task. This section of the chapter has only indicated some of the avenues of approach to a challenge that demands an individual response in each situation.

PRESENTING THE BASIC ATTITUDES

An important step in the psychodramatic exploration of a problem is the explicit portrayal of the protagonist's attitudes and basic assumptions about himself, others, and the nature of human relationships. These attitudes are often phrased in terms of internalized sentences, that start with "should" and "ought." Encouraging the protagonist to make these statements explicit is necessary because they represent the values of his superego.

JOE: (soliloquizing on stage with his double) How could I hate my father? You're not supposed to hate your father!
JOE'S DOUBLE: Right! I shouldn't hate him no matter what!
JOE: And anyway, I *love* him! How could I hate him?
DOUBLE: I can't love and hate at the same time!
JOE: Well, maybe I can.

Not only the protagonist's feelings are to be expressed, but also the attitudes that forbid the feelings from being accepted as part of his self-system. Some of these common attitudes include:

Men aren't supposed to cry.

I should be able to handle this myself.

Being emotional is a sign of weakness.

If I start crying I may never stop.

If I express my anger I'm afraid I might lose control or kill someone.

If I try to love someone, that person should be happy.

If I'm not happy, it's because they don't really love me.

People should be able to resolve their conflicts.

I should have known this by now.

If I haven't lived up to my expectations, I must be a failure.

There are hundreds of such "internal commands." Many of what I've called the "lies we live by," the clichés, popular overgeneralizations, and general attitudes are described and critiqued in many self-help books (Gillett, 1992). These core beliefs were part of what Adler referred to as "private logic" (Manaster & Corsini, 1982). They were made more explicit in the pioneering work of Albert Ellis (1962) and the increasingly popular cognitive therapy approach. Knowing about them is as important for a psychodramatist as for a physician to know about the different kinds of infectious micro-organisms.

Another way to portray the different attitudes and complexes is to split the protagonist into different "selves." For example, one part might be the judging, rule-pronouncing complex, while the other part is the rebellious, or passive-aggressive, sulking self. This analysis is similar to Fritz Perls' (1969) concept of *top-dog* versus *underdog*, or Eric Berne's terminology of *parent*, *adult*, and *child* (Naar, 1977).

EXPLORING THE CORE CONFLICTS

The problem originally presented is often not at the root of the protagonist's emotional concerns. Basic attitudes have been established in earlier life, and it is the relationships of that period that are the next to be enacted. Sometimes what is indicated is not a movement from the present to the past, but from a relatively superficial to a more personal conflict, such as a sexual problem with a spouse or a struggle between different needs within the protagonist himself.

As these core relationships are portrayed, it may seem obvious to the director or the group that the protagonist is distorting the feelings of the other persons in his life. The director should be in no hurry to correct these distortions. First, the protagonist must present the situation as he experiences it: This is *his* truth. He must experience being listened to. Only then does he become more receptive to exploring the possibility that the situation might have other points of view.

In our example of Joe, the director may explore scenes in which Joe wanted to be accepted by a father who had unrealistically high expectations of him. Joe's fantasies can be portrayed in scenes in which he is abandoned, rejected, or judged as inadequate by his father. Exaggerating the physical relationships may help in clarifying the protagonist's experience of significant events (Figure 5.11).

Joe role-reverses and portrays his own conception of his father's behavior. Indeed, Joe's portrayal of the father's judgment may be

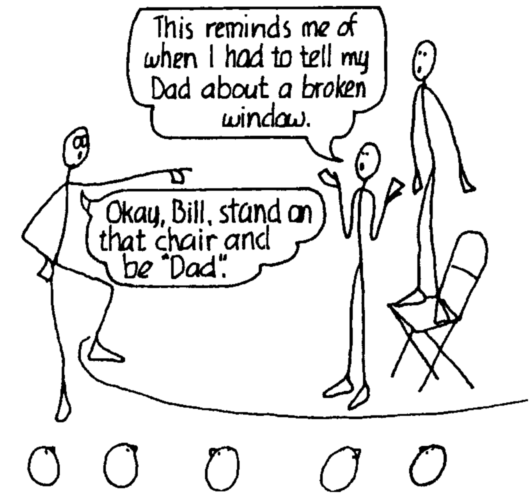

Figure 5.11

so harsh as to seem unrealistic to the audience, as if Joe is caricaturizing what a "bad father" does. This is probably because he is projecting onto his father the anger and guilt he feels within himself toward the weaknesses that only he himself secretly knows and condemns. Thus, through role reversal the protagonist is helped to portray the distortions of his interpersonal perceptions by acting out what he believes others think (i.e., his own projections). This kind of approach can thus be an effective form of diagnosis of the protagonist's psychodynamics.

ACT HUNGER

Directors should not be impatient to have their protagonists "be realistic," because this demand denies them the experience of having their psychological truth validated. One of the implications of the major development of "self-psychology" in psychoanalysis in the 1980s was the recognition of people's need for empathic resonance. It's as if the "inner child" cannot listen until it first feels really listened to, and it can't have that experience unless it's allowed to fully express itself. People need to hear themselves think and feel, and this is aided by having other people around who validate this process.

One of Moreno's more perceptive insights is that people need even more than mere self-expression. They need—at least symbolically—to experience doing things that fulfill their needs, not just to talk about them. People who work with children know this, and we should not presume that this need is lost in the process of normal development. Moreno used the term *act hunger* to describe the drive toward a fulfillment of the desires and impulses at the core of the self. The director should help the protagonist achieve a symbolic fulfillment of his act hunger, because it, too is a fundamental part of the protagonist's psychological truth.

In the example of the enactment we have been using, the protagonist, Joe, first presents his father in the most caricatured form. It is not time to explore who the father "really" was through role reversal—that time may come later. First, Joe needs to overcome his denial of his own vulnerability and discover his associated rage, and this can only happen through a scene in which he finally confronts his father; he may gain some insight into the rage he has held toward his father by the director's helping him to portray his anger in *act fulfillment*. As the protagonist portrays the anger, themes of need and frustration, which are the bases of the anger, should be interwoven.

It is important that the director be aware of the psychotherapeutic maxim, "Don't ventilate the hostility without the protagonist's also experiencing his dependency." That is to say, deal with the protagonist's need for something that is frustrated by the significant other. The catharsis of rage is usually a catharsis of longing (Blatner, 1985a).

For example, as Joe confronts his rigid, demanding father, whose unshakable coldness is dramatized and exaggerated by an auxiliary ego, Joe escalates his efforts to "get across to the old man," without any success. Finally, he is ready for violence; the director throws him a pillow and says, "There's your father — what do you feel like doing to him?" Joe begins to beat the pillow, curse at the father and, with the help of the double and director, express his pent up frustrations (see Figure 5.12).

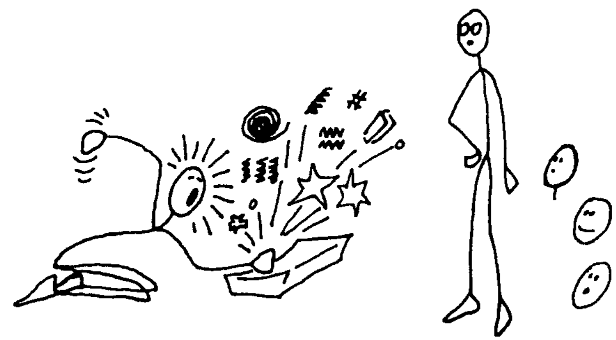

Figure 5.12

JOE: You never cared about me! All you saw was what you wanted! (He continues to strike the pillow, and is beginning to cry.) You bastard! I wish you were dead! (Beats the pillow furiously and cries.)

At this point, after a full expression, the director can move in several directions. He may bring onto the stage an auxiliary to be the "good father" who can "see Joe for what he really is." The "reformed" auxiliary may hold Joe and talk to him (Sacks, 1970).

Another very powerful technique is the *death scene*. It can be applied either to the death of the protagonist himself or as a vehicle to review the feelings in relationship to a significant other person (Siroka & Schloss, 1968). In the first form, the protagonist is instructed to visualize his own death (the director may dim the lights). The director might warm up to the situation by asking him how he died, what it felt like, who is around him, and other related questions. The questions and final statements to others and (through role reversal) of others toward the "dead" protagonist help clarify some of the emotional issues (Rowan, 1973). (This method is useful for emphasizing the role of the choosing, responsible self—the adult ego state, in transactional analysis terms.) Finally, the death scene can move toward a "rebirth scene."

The death scene may be interwoven with judgment scenes, judgment of others, or of the self (Sacks, 1965). The encounter with St. Peter is often a useful technique. (St. Peter is the archetypal figure guarding the gates of heaven who reviews the values and meaning of the protagonist's life with him.) St. Peter can play the role of the friendly and gentle interrogator. If the situation seems more appropriate for a judgment by other people of the protagonist's life, members of the audience can be called in as jurors.

One variation of the death scene I like to use is the shift in St. Peter's role from judge to philosopher. This usually surprises people, for they are expecting St. Peter to be impressed by status and "righteousness" issues, and upset by pecadilloes. Instead, St. Peter simply asks: "How was it?" He does not respond to answers reflecting the protagonist's status, that is, what the protagonist "proved." Rather, he asks about the protagonist's values and enjoyments: "Did you do what you had to do? Did you do it in your own way? Did you 'create' along the lines of your natural strengths, inclincations; or did you fulfill your life in a role that was alien to your soul, because you were trying to live up to someone else's expectations?" Sometimes I follow this scene by giving the protagonist an opportunity to enact the role he would choose if he could be reborn in any kind of life he wanted.

A second major format of the death scene is more commonly used, and involves the death of the significant other person. With a protagonist who seems involved in continuously struggling to change the other person, to "make him see," the director may stop and say, "He's dead now." or, "You have just received a telegram notifying you of his death. You rush back and stand at his bedside." Another variation is for the director to say to the protagonist, "You have five minutes to talk to him before he dies. Now is the time to make your goodbyes, ask your final questions, express your honest resentments and appreciations." For example:

JOE: (to "dying father") Y'know, Dad, I resented your judgment of me as a child.

DIRECTOR: Reverse roles. (Joe moves over to the empty chair, becoming the father)

JOE: (as father) Well, son, I wanted so much for you, but you've done okay. (Change parts)

JOE: Dad, how do you feel about me now? (Change parts)

FATHER: Joe, I'm kinda proud of you, I really am.

JOE: Dad, I love you, you know that?

AUXILIARY: (as father) I know, son (Joe weeps.)

Often the son makes his peace with his father in an atonement (at-one-ment). "Saying goodbye" is an important method also for reinforcing the protagonist's sense of identity (Blatner, 1985b; Kaminsky, 1981): "I'm going on. I don't need your support any longer. I can say goodbye. It hurts, but I can let go."

An important principle of healing is that the protagonist, with the help of surplus reality, is enabled to create the desired experience. In the spirit of what the psychoanalyst Franz Alexander called "an emotionally re-educative experience," imaginary scenes function to bring into consciousness the person's needs that have been repressed. The technique of *the reformed auxiliary* (Sacks, 1970) symbolically gratifies that need with the validation of the director and the group. An example of this is a scene in which the auxiliary, having played a rejecting or withholding role in a previous enactment, now is directed to play a more nurturing, positive role (Greenberg-Edelstein, 1986).

Another powerful technique that can sometimes follow a death-and-rebirth scene is the "crib scene." This method is also useful in allowing the protagonist to experience his own dependency needs. The technique is often applied to the entire group, including the protagonist. Doris Twitchell Allen (1966) describes it as follows:

> "Today we can be babies—just young infants in a crib. And we can lie on the floor like babies. Pretend that you are a baby." The director has the group lie on the floor, as if they were babies in a crib. Then the director, in the role of the nurturing mother, walks around from one to the other, patting them and covering them with an imaginary blanket:
>
> "So the baby goes to sleep, warm and quiet. So the baby gets heavy, and goes to sleep. And the mother comes and loves the baby. Takes care of the baby. Covers the baby and keeps it warm. Feeds the baby and gives it milk. Pats the baby. Watches over the baby and loves the baby. While the baby sleeps and sleeps." (This is usually repeated several times during a 5–20-minute sleep.)
>
> The sleep period is followed by the waking-up period:

> "So the baby begins to wake up. Begins to move a little, stretches a little. Opens its eyes. Begins to sit up. Feels good, feels alert, feels happy and content, sits up, gets up, gets back in the chairs."
>
> This is repeated as often as necessary for the group to wake up, and finally ending with:
>
> "Now as you sit back in your chairs you are adults again, acting like adults. But for a while you were a baby and the mother came and loved the baby and took care of the baby." (pp.24–25)

Often, in the discussion that follows, a number of group members have been profoundly touched by the opportunity to experience regression within a context of unconditional nurturance. Other reactions also make for a vigorous sharing.

Of course, the above-mentioned techniques can be applied in a multiplicity of situations, all depending on the sensitivity of the director.

Act hunger involves more than the expressions of anger and dependency: The protagonist can gain important insights through fulfilling the desire to boast, perform, demand attention, express tenderness, dance, soar, hug, wrestle playfully, fall effortlessly, and so forth. Scenes of act completion can involve death and rebirth, risking and trusting.

Act completion validates the protagonist's emotional experiences, thus reinforcing an integration of the previously rejected and suppressed dimensions of the personality. As some protagonists remark after a catharsis, "It's OK for me to cry—it doesn't prove I'm weak," or "Wow, I didn't know I had all that anger in me—I thought if I would start to let it out I'd never stop, but I guess I have more self-control than I thought." Thus, the protagonist can accept the anger, dependence, and other negatively valued emotions as part of himself and can redefine himself as one who, as a vital living being, contains many different feelings (Blatner, 1985a; Kellerman, 1984).

Act completion further validates the sense of active choosing as part of the self. There are many people who experience life as happening to them. They take a passive attitude and feel themselves to be rather lifeless and empty inside. The catharsis that so often

accompanies the psychodramatic process represents an active taking into the conscious self all the different mixed feelings that had heretofore been rejected and suppressed. Along with the feelings of anger and yearning, there is a sense of "determination to go on," which becomes integrated into the progatonist's self-concept and in turn adds a great deal of vitality to the sense of self.

It should further be noted that the excesses of emotion expressed within a psychodramatic enactment are not likely to lead to a complete loss of control. The presence of the director and group and the expectation of staying within limits act as influences to sustain a small amount of "observing ego" and "controlling ego" in the protagonist's personality. It is rare that a protagonist may begin to extend his destructiveness and stop "pulling his punches"; and even then an experienced director can quickly regain control.

SURPLUS REALITY AND ROLE REVERSAL

Following the portrayal of many of the protagonist's fantasies, attitudes, and the fulfillment of act hunger, the protagonist has usually achieved a measure of insight into the nature of his own feelings. To this is now added an exploration of some of the other emotional dimensions of the situation.

For example, the adolescent who has explored some of his own conflicts about taking responsibility (and his externalizations of this conflict onto authority figures) may then portray his future. This is another application of the previously mentioned principle of surplus reality, using the ideas of an alternative or possible existence in which other events occur. In the *future projection* technique, the adolescent can enact his life five years in the future (Yablonsky, 1954). The protagonist may discover that, as George Bernard Shaw once said, "There is only one thing worse than not getting what you want—and that is getting what you want!" Through future projection the protagonist can approach a more realistic viewpoint, and begin to portray scenes in which he can achieve some successes based on his own work.

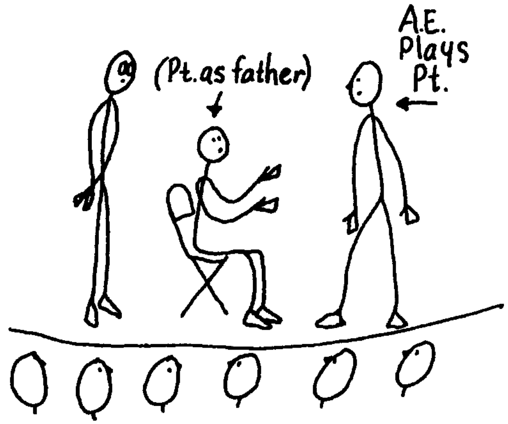

Figure 5.13

Another major form of utilizing surplus reality is to invite the protagonist to put himself in the place of the others in his life (role reversal). Through reversing roles (or changing parts) with the important figures in his psychodrama, the protagonist can develop some important practical and emotional insights into the others' situations (Figure 5.13). Thus, role reversal becomes a major technique for building the capacity for empathy with others (Kellermann, 1994).

For example, in the psychodrama of Joe, the director may have the protagonist explore some of the others' feelings after his catharsis:

DIRECTOR: Now, be your father.

JOE: (as father) All right, I *admit* I did want you to be a football player, 'cause *I* never had the chance.

DIRECTOR: Change parts.

JOE: (less whining) Well, Dad, that was your dream. I have my own interests—I'm not going to make excuses for myself anymore.

Later, the director may have Joe experience his employer's situation, and in the reversed role position Joe considers the possibility that Mr. Jones is susceptible to pressures from his other subordinates, Joe's co-workers:

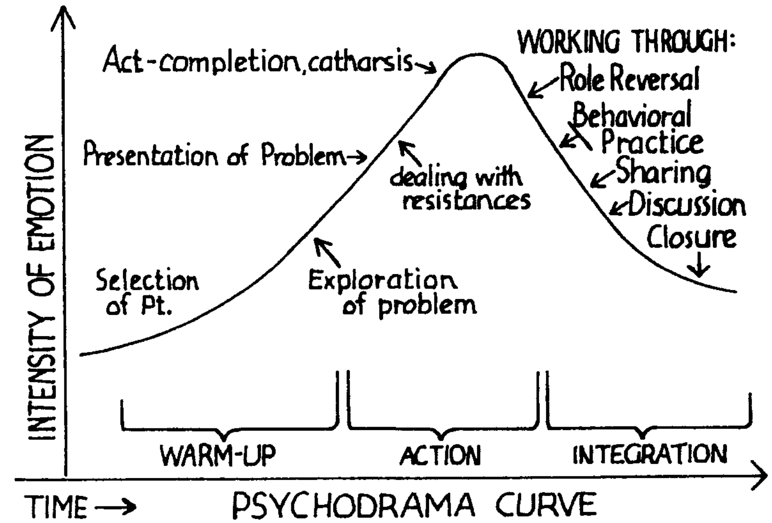

Figure 5.14

JOE: (as Boss) Look, Joe, I really don't like being in this position—

Then Joe can be helped to creatively find some approaches that might support his boss and yet help his own position, a way of self-assertion that might include making tactful constructive suggestions.

In addition to the use of role reversal and surplus reality, the process of integration involves behavioral practice, role training, sharing, discussion, and supportive closure. These dimensions and techniques will be discussed in the next chapter.

THE FLOW OF INTENSITY

Progress through the warm up, the action, and the closure can further be viewed in perspective by following a curve of intensity of involvement and feeling over the time in the session (Fig. 5.14)

(Hollander, 1978). As the protagonist approaches an apex of feeling, the resistances increase. He is always free to choose or refuse to explore further. This is established at the outset. As resistances grow, the director must continuously work mutually with the protagonist and decide whether to allow for some distance, take an alternative route on another day, or attempt to work through the resistances and reach the point of emotional openness. There may be many "working sessions" in which the protagonist is not ready to finish his exploration. There is no need for the director to feel that he must produce a dramatic catharsis in each enactment. This only leads to an undue "pushing" of the protagonist, instead of allowing him to grow at his own pace.

Once the protagonist has reached a point of act completion, catharsis, or otherwise has seemed to achieve his peak of emotion, the director should allow him to move toward reduced emotional intensity (i.e., integration and closure). The protagonist becomes confused by attempting to follow one exploration with another. Usually he has enough energy to deal with only one dimension of his life experience in any one session.

SUMMARY

During the action phase the protagonist is helped toward the gradual portrayal and exploration of the many dimensions of his life. The director generally attends to the protagonist's progress according to the following sequence:

1. Address first peripheral and then central issues.
2. Portray the spectrum of the protagonist's inner realities (for which reason psychodrama is called "the theater of truth").
3. Explicitly present internal attitudes and feelings, and their integration in "action insight."
4. Fulfill act hunger in act completion.
5. Allow a catharsis if it seems natural.

6. Begin exploration of the worlds of the significant others in the protagonist's social network through role reversal.
7. Then begin to develop the integration of whatever insights have been gained, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

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