

The following is an excerpt from the book:

Insight Improvisation

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

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Psolodrama Alone

A man can be himself only so long as he is alone, and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom, for it is only when he is alone that he is really free.

— *Arthur Schopenhauer*

Cautionary Note: Psolodrama is a practice designed for those who can hold and support their own emotional process. This chapter discusses using the psolodrama technique alone, unaccompanied by another person in the role of witness. For those suffering from trauma, depression, addiction, or other mental illness or disorder, it is **not** recommended to use psolodrama, or any other Insight Improvisation technique, alone.

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Over the years while developing psolodrama as a form, I have at times wanted to do the inner work that psolodrama facilitates but have been without a partner to witness me. Such an occasion arose while I was living in Thailand in 2007, and I found myself separated from my community of peers in the Boston area. Finding alternative ways of tapping into my body and psyche—especially being able to work alone without a witness—was vital to my process of growth and sense of emotional, mental, and spiritual health.

My friend and colleague Christopher Ellinger (a great champion of personal growth and social change through the arts) first suggested that I do psolodrama “solo.” I had recently taught him the psolodrama form, and he spontaneously decided to experiment with it alone. My first reaction was “sounds interesting, but it cannot be nearly as rich or focused as when working with a witness.” But my later experience in working alone proved this statement false.

Earlier in my work as a theater artist, I had attempted to create solo pieces by myself, without the assistance of a director. Although these pieces were ultimately successful, the process of creation was difficult. When I was in the studio alone, I found

myself lacking focus and motivation while overtaken by self-judgment. When reacting to Christopher's suggestion, I assumed that doing psolodrama alone would be a similar experience. But by then, I had already sown the seeds that led me to proving this assumption to be wrong.

Firstly, I had developed Insight Improvisation and the psolodrama form which create a sound structure and a clear set of distinctions and thus provide a “conceptual container” within which to work by myself. Secondly, I had ventured much more deeply into the practices of meditation and authentic movement, which helped me develop greater patience, mindfulness, and increased self-awareness and, most important of all, a more supportive inner-witness. With these developments, I found that I no longer felt lost or internally criticized when alone in the studio.

I discovered to my surprise and delight that doing psolodrama alone is not only possible but can be deeply moving, rich, and satisfying. It is an opportunity for uncensored self-expression, and to discover, gain insight into, and reflect on one's own mental, emotional, and spiritual state.

Benefits of Solo Psolodrama

Before discussing the benefits of working alone, it is important to clarify that I am *not* suggesting that doing psolodrama by oneself is superior to working with a partner—or with a therapist. There is no substitute for having a supportive witness, particularly one who can observe keenly and reflect back with empathy and wisdom. For those new to psolodrama, it is strongly recommended to begin by working with a trusted witness, before attempting to do psolodrama alone. In early stages, the development of one's

nonjudgmental inner witness occurs when it is modeled by an empathic external witness. Over time, working with an experienced witness can be transformative in deepening one's practice.

However, solo psolodrama has certain advantages.

One of the benefits of working alone is greater freedom. I have experienced a total freedom to express myself—to express the fullness of my feelings, my truth, in a completely uncensored way. Even before the best-trained nonjudgmental witness, I can feel guarded at times. Alone, that censorship disappears.

One example of this greater freedom is in the expression of emotion. Just as when working with a partner, psolodrama alone provides a space for catharsis. When working with a partner, it can be supportive and affirming to be witnessed having a cathartic emotional moment. Experiencing one's strong feelings in the presence of a witness can help develop qualities of vulnerability and openness with others. For some, the supportive presence of a witness helps provides a safe container in which they can fully express their feelings. But for others, being witnessed while getting emotional can feel *too* vulnerable, and can get in the way of a complete emotional release. Working solo, the psoloist can find herself crying in response to deep emotional realizations about her past and present, her family of origin, and her relationships with others. Because she is alone, she can simply be present to the feelings, without the added layer of awareness that someone else is watching her have those feelings. She can also learn that if she touches deep feelings when by herself, she can be OK—it does not need to be a “nervous breakdown” or a way to indulge in self-pity.

The added freedom of working alone goes beyond tears. Anything one might ordinarily censor when working with a partner is free to come up. This can include emotions such as anger, fear, or embarrassment; self-judgments voiced by a critic role (e.g., things I so dislike about myself that I'm too embarrassed to share them with another person); grandiose roles and situations (e.g., I may worry I'll come across as conceited in the witness's eyes if during my psolodrama I receive an affirming message from God or the Buddha); or anything that I fear will appear or sound too silly, strange, sexual, violent, rude, gross, etc.

Of course, each "advantage" of solo work also signifies an area of potential growth when working with a partner. For example, if I can learn to look silly in front of another person, or expose a part of myself that I am ashamed of, this is one further step in owning my own shadow and normalizing/socializing the split off parts of me. Doing psolodrama alone *and* with others can help me discover what I am suppressing, where I'm not being fully authentic and self-expressed.

Working with a partner, the witness can have a subtle influence on the content or process of one's psolodrama. Sometimes just knowing my witness likes a certain thing or has a certain way of being may unconsciously cause me to bend in that direction. Practicing psolodrama alone, I get to put my social self aside, the part of me that tries to please or be sensitive to others, and instead explore what is really going on inside myself, what is truly authentic for me.

I have also experienced a greater freedom as a witness. When sharing from the witness's cushion after a solo psolodrama (more about this below), I can feel free to interpret the meaning of what happened, knowing that I cannot make a mistake and

thereby offend the other—there is no other to offend! In witnessing myself, I have more intimate knowledge of the psoloist, his history, his emotional state, and his needs, than is usually the case.

Then, of course, there are the logistical advantages of working unaccompanied: with no partner there is no need to schedule with someone else, agree where to work, deal with the other person being late, etc. There is no need to agree on what warm-up to do; the psoloist can simply follow her impulse. She also has complete freedom of timing and form: if a solo psolodrama is feeling very rich but not yet complete, she can decide in the moment to keep going for as long as she pleases—whereas if time is limited with a partner, running over may not be possible or can feel awkward (she may have to interrupt the flow to communicate with her partner regarding timing) and can reduce the amount of time there is to reflect on the experience.

As with partner psolodrama, doing psolodrama alone has opened doorways to new insights into my life challenges, patterns, and stuck places, helping me find new ways to grow and change. Working alone, psolodrama becomes a type of embodied self-coaching—a way for me to draw on my own wisdom and guidance (the wisdom and guidance of the infinite community of roles within me), while also helping me dig deeper for the core truths underneath the challenges I am facing.

Finally, I have experienced in solo work another kind of freedom, one that artists working alone in the studio have drawn upon for inspiration: a greater openness to the unexpected. Once, after doing a moving solo psolodrama, I was about to enter the sharing phase when I received a phone call from my significant other (I had neglected to turn off the phone!). So, instead of sharing with my “witness” (myself in witness role), I found

myself sharing with my partner what had happened. Her reaction was beautifully supportive, and helped reinforce what I had discovered in the psolodrama.

How to Work Alone

Cautionary Note: It is strongly recommend to anyone wishing to try psolodrama alone that they first get a firm grounding working with another person— ideally, an experienced, supportive witness. If one has never practiced these forms, especially authentic movement, it is important to develop one's own inner witness within the container provided by the nonjudgmental, perceptive witnessing of another. Also, practicing the progression of authentic movement into shared vipassana, role stream, scene stream, and then psolodrama—becoming confident in that progression with the help of a partner—strengthens skills which can be applied when working alone.

Preparation is important; each person needs to discover his or her own ritual for working alone. When working with a partner, it is helpful to check-in and warm-up together. Working alone, I usually begin my practice by changing into movement clothes, clearing the space, setting up tools such as timing and recording devices, turning off telephones, etc.

A space that feels supportive to the practice is crucial. One needs privacy to raise one's voice, sufficient space to move, comfortable temperature and lighting. (All of

this becomes more important when working alone, as there is no other person to help create the sense of containment: it's just the psoloist and the space!) It is not necessary to have a lot of space: a bedroom or home office can often be sufficient.

A good warm-up not only helps one become relaxed and present, but also gets one's voice, body, energy, and creativity engaged. Personally, I enjoy preceding solo psolodrama with a little sitting meditation. More expressive activities such as yoga, dance, and improvisational singing can help free up one's instrument and ready it for playing a variety of roles. However, if one is pressed for time, the opening stages of the practice, authentic movement and shared vipassana, can serve as a warm-up.

A smartphone or other device can provide timing and potentially audio (or video) recording. For those still learning the “entryway” progression—authentic movement, shared vipassana, etc.—a more advanced timer app (such as a meditation timer) can help by providing alarms every two to three minutes for the opening stages, and then sound a two-minute warning prior to ending. Recording the psolodrama can help provide a little bit of the containing quality of an external witness; knowing that I am “on” now and being watched (or at least listened to) can lessen the likelihood my mind will wander, or that I will choose to stop and break out of the action.

Just Do It! In most ways, doing psolodrama alone is no different than with a witness. The psoloist allows her awareness to enter her body, and begins to follow her body as it moves. She begins to speak aloud what she is noticing coming through the six sense doors. She then notices what role or character this body position, movement, image, or vocal quality reminds her of, and becomes that role, moving, sounding, and speaking as it. She allows other roles to emerge, inviting interactions between roles. And she

accesses the various psychodramatic roles—protagonist, auxiliary ego, double, director, and audience—as she “cooks” the scenes to explore the emerging theme, conflict, or issue.

When she is done with her psolodrama, either reaching a natural ending or bringing her psolodrama to an end when the timer goes off, she can put some closure on the process in a few different ways, e.g. with silent meditation, journaling, drawing, etc..

My favorite thing to do after a solo psolodrama is to have a **sharing dialogue between the witness and the psoloist**. I find this to be a wonderful part of the process to preserve when working alone. After a solo psolodrama, I set up two cushions, one for the psoloist and one for the witness. I first sit on the witness cushion, and ask the psoloist (yes: I talk to the other, empty, cushion!) if he would like to speak first. Then I reverse roles, sitting on the psoloist’s cushion, and take a moment to really think/feel—do I have something I wish to say? Usually I do, and begin to reflect on the experience of the psolodrama, what were the most meaningful parts to me personally. When I feel finished speaking, I reverse roles again, sitting on the witness cushion. Here I allow myself to take the perspective of an outside eye: what if I were a good coach or drama therapist who had just witnessed this psolodrama—knowing Joel, what would I say to him that would be useful and supportive? Taking this perspective, I speak about what moved me, reflecting on parts of the process the psoloist may have omitted in his sharing, as well as discussing the meaning of various images and interactions. This can often lead to a dialogue with the psoloist, in which I find myself reversing roles several times. In a sense, the witness role is another manifestation of the director or double—each of these roles holds aspects of the supportive witness.

Although witnessing oneself can be quite satisfying, it is also powerful to later on share one's psolodrama experiences and insights with an actual other person, such as a close friend, partner, therapist, etc. Doing so is a bit like sharing a dream, or like discussing the personal insights from one's meditation practice. Having the other's affirmation and input can be encouraging, and can also help put challenges or struggles in perspective.

Overcoming Obstacles

One of the challenges when doing partner psolodrama (especially for those of us with theater backgrounds) is to understand that one is *not performing*. It can be very tempting, with the witness present as a live "audience member" watching attentively, to seek to entertain or engage the other.

The need to perform, and the desire for an audience, also presents a challenge when working alone. As an actor, attempting to perform my one-man show alone in a studio years ago felt strange and dissatisfying. Doing psolodrama by myself, I find it helps to close my eyes, tune into the body, and follow it into the world of imagination and role. As I sound and speak aloud, it is not to communicate with an audience, but rather to help me focus on the present moment, and to express feelings, thoughts, and create interactions between roles.

Distractions can bedevil the solo practitioner, both inner and outer ones. It can help to find as quiet and private a space to work in as possible, where one cannot be interrupted. But even then the unexpected is inevitable. Before beginning, one should make a commitment to complete the session, even if interrupted or distracted.

Inner distractions are worse—I may enter the authentic movement phase only to find that three minutes of thinking have gone by (planning, worrying...) and I have completely missed my own movement! Again, it must be the commitment of the psoloist to notice when this happens and simply return to being present, as in any good meditation, and continue with whatever next phase is in the process. It is important not to get caught up in judging oneself about the mind wandering—some days I am more focused than others, this is natural. If extraneous thinking is getting out of hand, it can be helpful to channel it into the process, by speaking those thoughts—this works especially well in the shared vipassana phase and is also easily incorporated into role stream, scene stream, and psolodrama. Also, having a timer with multiple bells for the different phases is great for bringing one back from mental wandering.

For the reasons mentioned above, the silent authentic movement phase may prove especially challenging for some when working alone. If so, try skipping this step, and do a longer shared vipassana.

If speaking aloud when alone proves difficult, it is important to diagnose why—does the psoloist feel shy (e.g., that someone will overhear), or feel that it is just strange to be “speaking to herself?” The psoloist might try whispering to start with to see if that feels easier. For myself, I find that working in a space where I can be as loud as I like is important—my best psolodramas are ones in which the range of expressiveness is wide: I need to be able to shout and sing and do whatever moves me in the moment. I also find that keeping eyes closed makes moving and speaking more natural—I can really place myself imaginatively in the scene.

For some, the biggest obstacle to doing psolodrama alone will be the lack of the container normally provided by the outside witness. Without this container, the psoloist may feel overwhelmed by his emotions, stuck in his issues or in repeated patterns, or caught in his head. If this is the case, it is important to be patient with oneself, and to draw upon all the tools of psolodrama: the ability to return to stillness and bodily awareness; to re-enter authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, or scene stream; or to call upon the director role, the double, or other supportive roles (such as a favorite mentor or wise figure).

If one feels overwhelmed, it is also possible to end the psolodrama and have a conversation with the “witness” (oneself on the other cushion), reviewing what transpired and finding the value in it.

However, if these obstacles prove too great, one must also be sensitive to when doing psolodrama alone is *not* appropriate—to realize when having the support of a friend or therapist is needed. Solo psolodrama is not for everyone: it takes experience in the psolodrama form (as well as in such foundational forms as meditation, authentic movement, and psychodrama); a supportive, nonjudgmental inner witness; as well as having clear ego boundaries and a positive, constructive outlook on one’s life.

As the warning at the beginning of this chapter says, please do not attempt psolodrama alone if you are suffering from depression, trauma, addiction, or other mental illness or disorder. These “obstacles” are not meant to be surmounted or ignored, but instead honored and treated with care.

Final Thoughts

Psolodrama, practiced alone, is a pure expression of what Insight Improvisation was created for: to be a personal path of growth and freedom. As in meditation, the insights gained when doing solo psolodrama are the psoloist's own discoveries, made naturally in the rhythm of her development as a human being.

I love doing psolodrama with a partner, and have gained so much from all the wonderful witnesses I have worked with. And I also find that there is a feeling of freedom when doing psolodrama alone that surprises me each time I practice. I hope that others, too, will have a chance to experience the power of this form.