

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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The Practice of Psolodrama

The light that gradually dawns on him consists in his understanding that his fantasy is a real psychic process which is happening to him personally.

— C. G. Jung (1977, pp. 528-529)

Cautionary Note: Psolodrama is a practice designed for those who can hold and support their own emotional process. It is **not** recommended for those suffering from severe trauma, depression, anxiety, mental illness or disorder.

Psolodrama is a melding of meditation, authentic movement, theatrical improvisation, and psychodrama. It is a practice of spontaneous and creative self-expression, an invitation to the body-mind to relax, open, explore, and express what lies inside. It is a vehicle for self-discovery, inviting deep exploration of personal challenges, patterns, and existential themes.

Like any of its constituent elements—meditation, authentic movement, etc.—psolodrama is a practice, which deepens and strengthens over time, with repetition. Every psolodrama is different, although certain themes and sometimes particular roles and/or scenes may be revisited over time.

As in authentic movement, psolodrama typically requires two people, **psoloist** and **witness** (the exception to this is when practicing psolodrama alone, described in the chapter aptly titled “Psolodrama Alone”). The witness role, as well as the sharing process that occurs following a psolodrama, is described in detail in subsequent chapters. The focus of this chapter, as well as the next two chapters (“Psolodrama Examples” and “Troubleshooting Psolodrama”) is on the role of the psoloist—essentially, how to practice psolodrama mindfully, deeply, and skillfully.

The Practice of Psolodrama	
<i>Intention and Attitude • Starting Out</i>	
<p><i>Use of the Five Psychodramatic Roles in Psolodrama</i></p> <p>Protagonist • Auxiliary Ego Director • Double • Audience</p>	<p><i>Guidelines for Psolodrama</i></p> <p>Enter Empty • Go for the Heart Follow Intuition • Let Go of Performing Ask the Director • Ask for Coaching if Needed Enjoy It!</p>

Intention and Attitude

A psolodrama takes place in the imaginal space where healing can occur. — Cate McQuaid (personal communication, March 23, 2011)

The purpose of psolodrama is to experience a full expression of, transformation of, and/or new insight into, the core emotion, conflict, issue, or theme arising.

In the process, psolodrama can evoke a profound sense of catharsis, opening, or resolution.

Like a good psychodrama, a good psolodrama is often not “comfortable”—it is a powerful way to explore one’s growing edges, and calls for vulnerability, honesty, and courage.

That said, the psoloist’s impulse to explore and be at her growing edge is balanced, ideally, with the intention to relax, bring mindful awareness, follow the body, and listen deeply to what’s happening inside—if not, the psoloist may find that she is controlling the psolodrama rather than allowing it to emerge organically.

Therein lies a paradox at the heart of psolodrama—on the one hand, to follow the body/mind as a meditator or authentic mover would do, letting go of planning/controlling mind, and being a witness to the process; on the other hand, to notice the themes arising, follow them, explore them, and even “cook them,” as a psychodrama director would do, with the aim of discovering something new.

To maintain a balance between the two—letting go while exploring what’s arising—requires holding each intention lightly.

Starting Out

*(We shall assume for this chapter that psoloist and witness have already checked in, warmed up, and agreed upon timing and other details. For more information on this, please see the previous chapters *Warming Up to Psolodrama* and *The Entryway to Psolodrama*.)*

The psoloist enters empty, without a preconception of what will happen. He finds a comfortable place and position to start in, and closes his eyes. Tuning into breath and body sensations, he enters into authentic movement, becoming aware of feelings and inner imagery.

One best practice is to follow the “entryway” progression of authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream—described in the last chapter—before entering into psolodrama. Often the last characters discovered in the role stream or scene stream make a perfect launching-off point for the psolodrama. One of these characters may be the protagonist, the other an auxiliary ego; from this point the psoloist can develop a dialogue between the two, and can optionally add any of the other psychodramatic roles described below.

However, for advanced practitioners, a little authentic movement may be all that’s needed to begin a psolodrama. From his movement, the psoloist may immediately sense the presence of a character or role, or have an image for where he is or what he is doing that suggests a role or scene. The psoloist adds sound, then words, and then finds himself in one of the five psychodramatic roles described below.

The solo improvisation that develops is a series of spontaneous monologues and dialogues featuring these roles, all embodied by the psoloist.

Use of the Five Psychodramatic Roles in Psolodrama

(In addition to descriptions of the roles, brief examples of dialogue appear below to illustrate how each role works. For more extensive examples from actual psolodramas, please see the next chapter, “Psolodrama Examples.”)

As described earlier, in the chapter “Foundations of Psolodrama,” psolodrama owes a large debt to psychodrama and its creator, Jacob Moreno. In psolodrama, the five roles typically found in psychodrama—protagonist, auxiliary ego, director, double, and group—are adapted for use by the individual playing all of those roles, the psoloist.

Although the distinctions of the five psychodramatic roles are useful in psolodrama, they are not essential. A psolodrama can be as simple as a single character’s monologue, or a dialogue between two characters. Like any tool, the distinction of the five psychodramatic roles can be applied or not, depending on the need.

The Protagonist: The Hero; or, Oneself in the Drama

The protagonist is the central character of a story. Because a psolodrama can contain more than one scene, and because the psoloist’s point of view can shift during psolodrama, it is quite common to have more than one protagonist role arise in a single psolodrama.

There are three basic kinds of protagonist that tend to occur in psolodrama (parallel to the three narrative stances distinguished by van Itallie in his teachings on storytelling—see the chapter “Storytelling” in Part II of this book):

Present-Day Self (P1). The first type of protagonist, most similar to the protagonist role in psychodrama, is the psoloist herself, right now in the present moment,

the person who is not only enacting the psolodrama but also experiencing it, and able to comment on and question the experience as it unfolds. As P1 protagonist, the psoloist speaks in the same voice as when she did shared vipassana: first person, present tense.

Past/Future/Transformed Self (P2). The second type of protagonist is the psoloist in the past or future, e.g., as a child, a teen, an old woman or man, etc. This type of protagonist may appear when she replays scenes from earlier in her life, or when she engages in “role-rehearsal,” playing out hypothetical situations or practice future interactions. P2 can also be the psoloist in an imaginary state—e.g., before birth, after death, transformed into a different gender, etc.

The Hero/Heroine (P3). The third type of protagonist, which can emerge from role stream or scene stream, is a role or character that is not the psoloist, yet feels like the hero or heroine or central figure of the story. E.g. if in her improvisation a conflict is emerging between a worm and a butterfly, she may naturally feel that the worm is “her” (the heroine of the story) and that the butterfly is the “other” (also called the auxiliary ego—see below). However, she could just as easily feel that the butterfly is the heroine, not the worm.

In the following example, **P1, P2, and P3** denote the three different kinds of protagonist:

Worm (P3): *I don't care if I'm not beautiful like you, butterfly! I'm just going to go in my hole and sulk.*

(The psoloist steps to the side as if she's now observing the worm and butterfly from outside the scene.)

Pat (P1): *Wow...this worm seems really depressed. It's like when I was a little girl and used to just stay in my room.*

(Throwing herself on the floor.)

Patty (P2): *I don't care! No one likes me. I'm going to cry until this blanket is soaking wet.*

Although the protagonist is typically the central figure in the drama, it is important the psoloist not get stuck in a P1 monologue. Embodying a variety of roles—and having them interact physically and verbally—is essential to the power of psolodrama. That said, sometimes a role—often P3—is so satisfying to play that one's impulse is to stay with it and explore what it has to say. The psoloist may end up staying with that role, letting it speak, for the entire psolodrama.

Sometimes it is unclear which role is the protagonist. It's important to not force clarity on this situation. Instead, the psoloist can let the scene play out and see what emerges. It may be that the scene is about two opposing forces (e.g. a mother and father arguing; two boxers in a ring; etc.). Perhaps P1 (present-day-self) will later step out of the scene to comment on it, ask the director a question about it, or speak to the two other roles.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, a psolodrama can be comprised of a number of scenes, each with its own P2 or P3 protagonist. After each scene, the psoloist may return to movement, role stream, or scene stream to discover what's next. Or the next character or scene may present itself immediately.

The Auxiliary Ego: The Other

Auxiliary egos are other characters who may appear in the scene, real or imagined. These can be:

Specific people	e.g., the psoloist's mother, Bruce Springsteen, the Buddha
Archetypal roles	the King, a beggar, a wise old hag
Talking animals, plants, or objects	a whale, a rotting tree trunk, a treasure chest, a ball of energy
Gods, forces of nature	Zeus, a mud monster, fire
Parts of the self	the Inner Critic, the Guide (see the Director, below), the Procrastinator, the Feminine or Masculine side (Anima/Animus), Inner Angels or Demons
Ideas or emotions	Death, Love, Jealousy, Forgiveness, Enlightenment
...or anything that one can imagine...	

Auxiliaries are sometimes supportive (a beloved mentor, an ideal parent, an angel), antagonistic (e.g., the inner critic, an ex-spouse, a pack of angry dogs, an abusive boss), or changing (e.g., a scary monster that later in the drama becomes an ally or guide). There is a parallel here to the meditative concepts of desire, aversion, and delusion: some auxiliary ego roles we love, others we hate, and others are ambiguous, mysterious, illogical, or hard to grasp.

In psolodrama, what distinguishes the auxiliary ego from the protagonist is an intuitive feeling of “other,” or “not me.” However, this feeling may change during the

psolodrama—what began as an auxiliary may later become the protagonist of the story. From a Jungian perspective, such a change from auxiliary ego to protagonist may represent an integration of the shadow.

Much of the power of psolodrama (and, originally, psychodrama) comes from entering the role of the auxiliary ego and playing it fully. E.g., if the psoloist is playing his father, the experience deepens as he takes on his father's stance, body language, facial expression, vocal delivery, etc. In doing so, he more readily empathizes with his father's feelings and thoughts, attitudes and beliefs.

There is no limit to the number of auxiliary egos that can appear in a psolodrama. In some of the most honest psolodramas, the psoloist is ruthless in including every single voice that enters his head, embodying every thought and feeling as a character—even down to the voice that is imagining how stupid the witness must think the psolodrama is (or how screwed up the psoloist is). Jumping from character to character, dialogues arise and evaporate, as the psoloist spirals down through layers of self-judgment, shame, and story to discover the heart of his issue.

Ultimately, through playing a wide range of auxiliary egos, the psoloist learns to expand the repertoire of roles he can spontaneously play in life. And by letting parts of the self speak and express in ways they have not done before, the psoloist learns to be more open and less inhibited, qualities that can carry over into his daily life.

The three additional roles which follow, the Director, the Double, and the Audience, can be thought of as special cases of the Auxiliary Ego role:

The Director: The Inner Guide

The director is the psoloist's inner guide, wise mind, inner therapist, or coach. Whereas in psychodrama, the director is the psychodramatist leading the session, in psolodrama the director is a role the psoloist embodies—a role with its own distinct point of view, voice, physicality, etc.

The protagonist (usually P1) can call upon the director to help clear up confusion, answer a question, get unstuck, etc.:

Pat (P1): *Wow...this worm seems really depressed. (Pause.)*

Director, why is this worm in my psolodrama anyway—it's such an ugly, depressed creature.

(The psoloist steps to a new spot and turns to face where P1 just stood. She pauses for a moment to breathe, center, and relax. She speaks in a deeper, more grounded voice:)

Director: *When you look at the worm, how do you feel?*

(Returning to the spot where P1 was, the psoloist takes a moment to tune into her feelings.)

Pat (P1): *I feel sad. It's like when I was a little girl and used to just stay in my room.*

Director: *What do you need right now?*

(The psoloist begins to cry.)

Pat (P1): *I want to talk to my father. Dad, why didn't you come and talk to me when I felt so alone and hated?*

(Pat becomes her father and the scene continues...)

The director can dialogue with and ask questions of the protagonist, such as “How do you feel right now?” or “What do you need?” and can also suggest or confirm what the next step might be. If the psoloist is truly stuck, the director can get more creative, e.g.: “If you could have someone, anyone in the world, enter the scene right now, whom would you want it be? Go with your gut instinct.” Rather than create a prolonged dialogue with the protagonist, the director’s questions are designed to return the psoloist to action.

It is important to distinguish the director role from the “inner critic.” The director is there to ask questions, and gently guide, not to chastise the protagonist or boss her around. This is not to say that embodying the inner critic is bad or wrong; in fact, taking on the inner critic as a role in psolodrama and letting it speak can be very powerful. But it’s helpful to differentiate the critic from the director so that the inner supportive resource the director role embodies remains fully available to the psoloist.

The Double: The Truth-teller

The double gives voice to the inner thoughts and feelings the protagonist does not yet feel able to speak.

When becoming the double, the psoloist is invited to speak his full truth, and express all of the feelings present for him in that moment. It helps when becoming the double to move slightly (e.g., to take a step back), to represent that this is an inner voice speaking.

For example, in a psolodrama scene between the protagonist and his mother, the protagonist may be thinking all kinds of things he would not ordinarily say to his mother. By becoming the double, he can say it all, as in this role-rehearsal conversation::

Mother (auxiliary): *Let me be honest. If you decide to marry him, I just cannot give my approval.*

Protagonist (P2—future self): *Well...I...I don't know what to say to you.*

(The psoloist takes a step back and becomes the Double.)

Double: *I know what to say—you're driving me CRAZY! Who are you to judge whom I choose to be with? Whom I choose to marry? It's MY LIFE! Not yours! To heck with you, Mom.*

Mother: *(Gasps.) Well I never. You don't talk to me like that!*

Protagonist (P2): *NOW I do! And let me tell you, mom, here's news for you: I'm gay. So you'd better get used to the idea.*

It can be useful, as in the scene above, to allow the auxiliary ego to hear what the double is saying and respond to it. Once the truth is out, the protagonist, emboldened, can take over the dialogue from the double if he feels ready to. As in psychodrama, the double is there to unlock inner feelings; once those feelings are expressed, the double may no longer be needed.

Any role can have a double. In an interaction between the auxiliary ego role of Wicked Witch and the protagonist role of Dorothy (P3), Dorothy might be too afraid to

yell at the Wicked Witch. By becoming the double, the psoloist can access and speak all of what Dorothy feels inside, or what the present-day adult mind of the protagonist wants to say. The psoloist can also take a step back from the Wicked Witch and speak as *her* double:

Wicked Witch (auxiliary ego): *I'll get you my pretty! And your little dog, too!!*

(The psoloist takes a step back.)

Witch's Double: *(suddenly looking very sad) No one...loves me. No one cares about me. Ohhh....I just want to curl up in a ball and die.*

Dorothy (P3): *There, there, don't be sad...*

The Audience: The Observer

Whereas in classic psychodrama the audience is comprised of other group members who are watching the action (and may be called upon to participate at any time as auxiliaries), in psolodrama the psoloist can take on the role of audience herself, speaking what observers might say if they were witnessing the scene at hand.

The audience may be an inner critic, a chorus of support, a bored theatergoer, a favorite mentor, a group of whispering townspeople, etc.

The audience can also simply voice what the protagonist might say if she herself were witnessing the psolodrama.

As with any role in the psolodrama, the protagonist can dialogue with the audience and interact with them—and even pull them into the action, if desired:

Witch's Double: *(suddenly looking very sad) No one...loves me. No one cares about me. Ohhh....I just want to curl up in a ball and die.*

Dorothy (P3): *There, there, don't be sad...*

(The psoloist sits off to one side and pretends to be munching popcorn.)

Audience: *Oh my God. Don't be so maudlin. She's the Wicked Witch for goodness sake. Kill her!*

Dorothy (P3): *But I can't. She's really just sad inside. Like we all are.*

Audience: *That's a load of BS. Throw a bucket of water on her!*

Protagonist (P1): *OK, if you're so tough, why don't you do it?*

(Psoloist reaches out and "grabs" the audience, miming pulling him up into the space.)

Audience: *Hey, get your mitts off of me! Well, OK, if you insist. Here's the water! (Mimes throwing water at the witch.)*

Wicked Witch: *NOOOO! I'm melting...! (Melts to the ground.)*

(The psoloist slowly rolls to one side, curled up in a fetal position.)

Witch's Double: *Now I am at peace. At last I can rest. Thank you for releasing me from the hell I was in.*

Guidelines for Psolodrama

The guidelines which follow are designed to help the psoloist have as powerful an experience as possible doing psolodrama.

Like any rules in Insight Improvisation, these are designed to be broken. When in doubt, experiment and discover what works best for you.

Enter Empty

Unlike traditional psychodrama, in which the protagonist states beforehand what issue or theme she would like to work on, in psolodrama the psoloist puts her current issues and problems aside, enters the space, and begins to follow her body, trusting what comes up through her movement, sensations, emotions, inner imagery, and the roles and scenes that emerge.

In the same way that one does not do authentic movement “about” something, the psoloist does not declare the theme of her psolodrama beforehand. Invariably, what emerges organically is more interesting than, and often several layers beneath, the psoloist’s presenting issue.

Go for the Heart—Trust It

The psoloist aims for the heart of the matter—he does not avoid, delay, or dance around the issue, or censor his impulses, but instead dives in and completely embodies the images, feelings, roles, and themes arising, fully and authentically, truthfully and honestly, following the developing scene wherever it takes him, with courage and the spirit of exploration.

To do this requires trust: trusting the safety of the container, including the confidentiality and unconditional support of the witness; trusting oneself, to hold all that is arising, even what is painful; and trusting the process, that following it will lead somewhere that is useful, instructive, possibly cathartic, even healing.

One corollary of this guideline: if a new role is mentioned in a scene, embody that role. For example, if the psoloist is talking about his mother, the most powerful thing he can do in that moment is to become his mother, and speak as her. In this way, “talking about” someone is transformed into action, and even an offhand mention of a role or character can lead to a central scene or story arc of the psolodrama.

(Resistance in psolodrama—essentially, a lack of trust—can occur for a variety of reasons. See the chapter “Troubleshooting Psolodrama” for approaches to working with resistance.)

Follow Intuition—Let Go of Logic

At any time, the psoloist can return to stillness, silence, and authentic movement, or can shift roles or scenes. No distinction is made between fact, fantasy, past, present, or future—psolodrama can mingle them all. The psoloist can jump in location and time, even shift to what seems like a completely different story and set of characters. What began as monster or villain may emerge as protagonist.

The psoloist consciously avoids doing her “good ideas” but instead draws inspiration from what her body is experiencing in each moment, as well as from inner imagery and “gut” feel or intuition. There is no need to explain shifts or jumps—witness and psoloist can discuss them afterwards.

Let Go of Performing

Whenever he found himself pushing any harder than what was actually happening, he'd stop and return to neutral. — Ruth Zaporah on Min Tanaka, Butoh performer (workshop lecture, May, 2004)

Psolodrama is not a performance, but a personal process—the psoloist is there to explore his own growing edges. The witness will get what she gets. The psoloist's eyes can be closed throughout, which can help him break free of the impulse to perform for the witness.

That said, for many actors (and other performers), the joy of acting is a positive force, and can contribute passion and energy to psolodrama.

However, if the psoloist notices he is making choices meant to entertain, please, or impress the witness, or if he finds that he is pushing too hard, controlling or overthinking the psolodrama rather than letting it happen, he can return to his meditative self, listen deeply to the body, and follow what the body wants to do. Returning to stillness or authentic movement can be an antidote to “Performance Mind.”

Ask the Director

If the psoloist feels lost or confused, she can always enter the role of director, and provide supportive coaching to herself. Questions from the director, such as “how do you feel right now?” or “what do you need?” often help clarify where the psoloist needs to go next.

If the director cannot help, the psoloist can always return to stillness and awareness of breath, then authentic movement, and then the entryway practices—shared

vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. This essentially clears the slate, allowing the psoloist a fresh start and a chance to discover what's next.

Ask for Coaching if Needed

If the psoloist feels a need for additional support, he can ask the witness, either before or during the psolodrama, to be his coach. The witness should only provide coaching if requested by the psoloist—it can be disruptive to the psoloist if the witness speaks without being invited to. *(See the chapter “Coaching Psolodrama” for best practices when coaching others.)*

Enjoy It!

Psolodrama is meant to be enjoyable. How often do we get to create our own spontaneous one-person show—a show that can be about whatever we like, where we get to fulfill our deepest dreams, or say things we have never said aloud before? How often do we get to go on a journey into our own psyche, exploring all the dark corners, shadows, areas of shame, and habitual mindsets that have limited us in life? And how often do we get to do this in front of a dedicated, supportive witness, who is there just to help us?

If you follow the joy of your experience, follow your passion, you cannot go wrong in psolodrama—discover what intrigues you and follow it.

References

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Additional Reading

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http://www.insightimprov.org/Resources_files/psolodrama_in_brief.pdf