

Psolodrama: Authentic Movement Meets Psychodrama

by Joel Gluck, M.Ed.

January, 2006

[A modified version of this article appeared in the Spring 2006 issue of *A Moving Journal*, a publication devoted to Authentic Movement. See www.movingjournal.org.]

“If we want to solve a problem that we have never solved before, we must leave the door to the unknown ajar.”

— Richard Feynman

“Visualize being out on the floor as a mover and finding yourself confronting either a bear or your yelling first grade teacher. Now visualize releasing into an interaction with that imagined figure in which you are free to move between roles, first embodying yourself and then the other figure. Let sounds and even words fuel the interaction. See where it carries you while your inner witness takes in the action compassionately, without judgment, open to surprise, humor, and amazement.” — Tom Webb

Psolodrama is a practice combining authentic movement and psychodrama. It is one technique in a larger set of concepts and practices I call Insight Improvisation, a system designed to explore the synergy between Buddhist meditation, theater, and drama therapy. I chose the term “psolodrama” to suggest a mixture of solo, drama, psyche, and a bit of soul.

Like authentic movement, psolodrama is an intuitive, body-centered vehicle for active imagination—Carl Jung’s term describing ways to intentionally integrate aspects of the unconscious with the conscious. What psolodrama adds to authentic movement in the active imagination process is the power of speech, a more intentional use of roles/characters, and several modified psychodramatic techniques (including role reversal, doubling, and dialogue with the director).

As in authentic movement, psolodrama is usually practiced with a witness and a mover, known as the psoloist, and can be practiced alone or in groups, although it is best explored one-to-one with a peer (after some initial training). Practicing psolodrama with a partner gives both participants a chance to be psoloist and witness, and helps create a safe, focused, and intimate container for the work.

There are typically three phases the psoloist experiences when practicing psolodrama: authentic movement, “role stream,” and psolodrama itself.

As in authentic movement, the psoloist begins by entering the space, and, with eyes closed, opens to movement impulse. The psoloist enters empty, without a preconception of what the psolodrama will be about.

As she moves, the psoloist becomes aware of sensation, emotion, inner imagery—the richness of moment-to-moment experience. Through moving, adding sound, and/or speech, she begins to embody a role or character: a person, animal, object, archetype, fantasy or dream figure. In this way, the psoloist enters the next phase of the process, known as the “role stream,” in which she begins to intuitively embody a series of roles.

A role may be suggested directly by a body position or movement, a sound one is producing, a particular sensation, etc. However, these same physical/vocal cues may first give rise to inner imagery, which may then suggest a role. For example, the psoloist is curled up on the floor, and envisions herself to be in a cave. Out of this image, she begins to move and make sound as if she were a bear cub emerging from hibernation. She may even begin to speak as the bear cub. All roles have the potential to speak, even if their real-life counterparts cannot.

A role may last any length of time—two seconds to two minutes is typical—and may speak, sing, growl, move silently, speak gibberish, describe itself, be still, express emotion, etc. As she follows this series of roles, watching each arise and pass away, the psoloist travels through a range of energetic states that serve to clear away surface tensions and the issues of the day, and enters a state of fluidity and emotional availability, a condition of readiness for psolodrama itself.

The Psychodramatic Roles

Next, the psoloist becomes aware of embodying one of five psychodramatic roles: protagonist, auxiliary ego, double, director, or audience. The psychodramatic roles as used in psolodrama parallel their use in classic psychodrama, but here are all embodied by one person, the psoloist:

1. **protagonist** — oneself in the scene. This can be the psoloist in the present, past or future, or oneself in an imaginary state, such as transformed into a monster.
2. **auxiliary ego** — the “other” in the scene. This can include other people, animals, imaginary or archetypal beings, etc. Some auxiliary ego roles create conflict in the scene; some are supportive or loving figures; and some are mysterious, illogical, and hard to grasp. Any number of auxiliary egos may appear in one’s psolodrama.

The three roles that follow are, in psolodrama, special cases of the auxiliary ego role:

3. **double** — a role that speaks and embodies the innermost thoughts and feelings of the protagonist, who may feel unable to do so. For example, if the protagonist is a little girl being frightened by an auxiliary ego wicked witch, the double may appear as a rational adult to express anger or curiosity about the witch.

4. **director** — the inner “wise mind,” therapist, or coach. This role is particularly useful when the psoloist is lost, confused, or needs support. Rather than giving direction, as the name might imply, the director is often at her best listening to the protagonist and asking supportive questions, such as “How do you feel right now?,” “What do you need?,” or “If you could have anything happen right now, what would that be?”
5. **audience** — the imagined role of those watching the psolodrama. This may be an individual, a chorus of family members, critics, fans, whispering townspeople, etc.

What gradually emerges in the psolodrama is a series of embodied interactions—monologues, dialogues, and physical exchanges—featuring these psychodramatic roles.

Intention and Other Guidelines

The psolodrama is driven by the intention to explore the themes, issues, or conflicts arising spontaneously in the process. Ultimately, the purpose of psolodrama is to come to a new insight into whatever has arisen. The insight may take the form of a new resolution, a catharsis, or a greater sense of freedom or flexibility.

A typical psolodrama may last fifteen to thirty minutes, with additional time set aside for sharing with the witness afterwards. As in authentic movement, it works well to agree upon time in advance.

The psolodrama is not a performance; the psoloist follows her own process, and the witness gets what he gets. As the psolodrama unfolds in an intuitive, moment-to-moment fashion, there is no need to be constrained by logic. A psolodrama can contain elements of past, present, and future, and can echo real-life events, dream imagery, and fantasy. Instant shifts in time, role, and scene are all possible, and do not need to be clearly communicated to the witness.

There is no requirement for the psoloist to play all five psychodramatic roles. The entire psolodrama may be one scene featuring the protagonist and one auxiliary ego. However, as in classic psychodrama, it is often in the reversal of roles and the resultant interaction that transformation often occurs. If the psoloist only monologues from a single role, the process can get stuck.

The boundary between the different roles can also be fluid. The psoloist may discover that a certain role she has embodied and assumed to be an auxiliary ego, for example, is actually the protagonist. Which is which is sometimes an intuitive choice on the part of the psoloist: “This role feels like ‘me,’ and that role feels like the ‘other.’” The dragon that felt like a scary “other” at the beginning of one’s psolodrama may later on feel more like “me”—the protagonist of the story.

At times the true nature of a role may be hidden, later on leading to important insights. For example, the psoloist may wish to speak to her director, but when she reverse roles, finds herself bossing the protagonist around, or judging her. It may begin to dawn on her that this is not her “inner wise mind” speaking, but instead her “inner boss” or “inner critic.” She may even choose to amplify the boss or critic, dialogue with it, etc., to see where that leads. Or, as is sometimes the case, she may not realize in the moment how the director and critic roles have become conflated, and only afterward, in dialogue with the witness, realize what happened (and the implications of the inner critic in her day-to-day life.)

If the psoloist feels confused, distracted, or stuck at any time, she has several options. She can return to stillness and silence, or to movement with or without sound, in order to once again tap into the flow of moment-to-moment awareness, noticing what arises. Another option is to call upon the inner director. It may feel funny at first to say aloud “director, I’m confused.” However, enabling the protagonist to dialogue with one’s own inner “wise mind” is one of the most useful aspects of psolodrama—important shifts can emerge from the dialogue between protagonist and director.

When psoloist and witness meet to discuss the psolodrama afterwards, the witness begins by asking the psoloist whether she would like to speak first. Because the psolodrama is often verbal, this allows the psoloist the welcome option of being quiet and listening to the other’s perspective first.

As in authentic movement, the primary task of the witness, in serving the psoloist, is to reflect what he observed during the psolodrama. In addition, the witness can offer experiences from his own life that resonate with or were catalyzed by the psolodrama (a form of sharing typical to groups practicing psychodrama). Often, the discoveries of the psolodrama are brought to greater clarity for both parties through the sharing dialogue.

How Does Psolodrama Differ from Authentic Movement?

In practice, there is nothing that would prevent an individual’s authentic movement from spontaneously evolving into a psolodrama-like improvisation. However, traditional authentic movement and psolodrama are distinguished by three important differences: the underlying intention, the use of speech, and the dramatic interaction of the psychodramatic roles. Fortunately, the skills and attitudes already developed by experienced authentic movers are an ideal foundation for the creative exploration that psolodrama affords.

Intention and Goal. Intention in authentic movement, if made explicit, is usually focused on the state of the mover as she enters into the movement, e.g. “I’d like to enter completely empty, let go of any preconceptions, and let my body lead me.” In psolodrama, the same intention to “enter empty” is there, but is accompanied by a goal. The goal is for the psoloist to experience a new insight into, transformation of, or full expression of the dilemma, conflict, issue, or scene that is arising. This means that once the psolodrama proper has begun (after the initial phases of authentic movement and role

stream), the psoloist does not let the psolodrama drift but finds ways to “cook” the action—e.g., through listening to the body, embodying the roles more fully, heightening the conflict, in order to more deeply explore the heart of the issue.

At the same time, an experienced psolodrama practitioner consciously lets go of any expectation of “transformation.” The paradox of psolodrama is to have a goal *and* to let go of the need for a particular outcome. By holding both sides of the dialectic, the psoloist allows the process to do its own work.

One reason experienced authentic movers are often particularly good at psolodrama is their ability to hold a goal without entering into “planning mind.” Rather than think about how a scene should develop, a practiced mover knows how to tap into intuition, picking up on subtle sensations and physical reactions to what is happening in the moment to help open to what comes next.

Speech Rooted in the Body. In authentic movement, recognizable speech is sometimes forbidden. Even sound can be ruled off-limits, although most authentic movers have had experiences of sound as an important part of their process. In psolodrama, which is designed as a solo movement form, sound, speech, and even song are welcome vehicles for exploration and self-expression.

However, speaking itself can become a trap—the value of a body-centered approach is lost if the psolodrama becomes a static monologue, with the psoloist talking from her head and not her heart or gut. When psolodrama is entered mindfully, beginning with movement and a focused awareness of the body, sensation, image, and emotion become the roots of the progression into role and speech. This is yet another reason experienced authentic movers are often particularly good at psolodrama.

Roles and Psychodramatic Roles. Roles often emerge in authentic movement. In psolodrama, roles are not just experienced physically but also voiced. This helps bring the role into focus, and helps the mover more deeply receive the rich messages each role may be communicating.

The psychodramatic roles were originally delineated by Jacob Moreno, who created psychodrama in 1920’s Vienna. Without the psychodramatic roles, psolodrama is more like a role stream, a series of characters that express parts of the self. Adding the distinction between protagonist and auxiliary ego, the psoloist immediately has a more useful container for examining and expressing her own feelings (those of the protagonist) while dialoguing with and confronting the views of another (the auxiliary). The other psychodramatic roles each support this process—the director as coach; the double as truth-teller; and the audience as outside eye.

Role Stream:	role A→ role B→ role C→ role D, etc.
Psolodrama:	auxiliary ego A→ protagonist→ auxiliary ego A→ protagonist→ director→ protagonist→ auxiliary ego B→ protagonist→ double, etc.

A third reason experienced authentic movers tend to do well in psolodrama is that they have developed accepting inner witnesses open to what is arising. Movers often experience great creativity and discovery in doing what others might find ridiculous. This positive relationship with the inner witness is extremely helpful in overcoming one's natural fear of embodying roles, speaking, and allowing personal material to arise in the psolodrama.

Practicalities

For those completely new to psychodrama or role-play, training can be beneficial before attempting to make the leap from authentic movement to psolodrama. Insight Improvisation contains a progression of activities that invite the use of language and role into meditation, movement, and improvisation, helping participants build comfort and trust. It can also be helpful to witness a psolodrama or two before trying it oneself.

Psolodrama is not for everyone. Because of the powerfully evocative nature of the technique, some may find themselves feeling overwhelmed, lost, or seriously stuck. Psolodrama is designed for those who have a healthy sense of boundaries and strong inner resources. Those suffering from mental illness, depression, or trauma should not attempt it, unless accompanied and actively coached by a trained drama therapist familiar with the form.

Outside coaching by an experienced practitioner or therapist can be a wonderful addition to psolodrama, provided the coach maintains a light touch, and uses the coaching primarily to move the psoloist into action and dialogue. (There is a strong parallel between the coaching a drama therapist can provide in psolodrama, and the guidance a dance/movement therapist can offer to a client doing authentic movement. Mary Whitehouse is one example of a therapist who coached movers in private practice.) If the context is unclear, the psoloist should clarify in advance if they would like to be coached by the other, and what the parameters should be—e.g., “coach me anytime,” or “coach me only when I stop my psolodrama and ask for help.” Ideally, the psoloist will always consult her own inner director first before seeking help from the external witness.

Practitioners will find it helpful to agree up front on timing for the different stages of the work. For example, if the psoloist has a total of 25 minutes for her psolodrama (followed by 20 minutes for sharing with the witness), it is useful to break up the time into five minutes of authentic movement, five minutes of role stream, and 15 minutes for the psolodrama itself. Bells rung by the witness can signal these segments. Some psoloists also like to have a two-minute warning bell before the psolodrama is to end. In one 90-

minute session, it is possible for both participants to have a chance to practice and share. If there is more time, starting the session with a check-in, some meditation, and a warm-up activity can also be beneficial.

Final Thoughts

Psolodrama has been at the heart of my own personal journey the last few years—it has been both an organic, inner process as well as a powerful outlet for creative and emotional self-expression during some of the most difficult passages in my life. As someone who has never found traditional forms of psychotherapy completely satisfying, discovering psolodrama was for me like hitting upon a fulfilling form of self-therapy.

As I have begun to share psolodrama with others, one-to-one as a drama therapist, as well as in group workshops, I have found that it helps clients and participants open to their inner wisdom and to a new sense of themselves. Like authentic movement, psolodrama gets people out of their heads and into their bodies, where new insights can arise. The addition of role and speech can help unlock pent-up emotions, as well as root new insights in memorable language and imagery. As a form of active imagination, psolodrama allows participants to open to unconscious material, discover its drama, and play it out.

Authentic movement and psolodrama are invitations to step through Feynman’s doorway into the unknown—opportunities to solve problems in new ways. My hope for us all is that, together, we continue to explore.

Joel Gluck, M.Ed., is a drama therapist, avid meditator, authentic mover, and leadership coach, who has been practicing and teaching theater and improvisation for over 20 years. For more information about psolodrama, training and warm-up activities, and Insight Improvisation as a whole, please visit the website www.jgluck.org. A full-length book on Insight Improvisation, including more than 70 experiential exercises, is in preparation. Joel can be contacted at (617) 591-9232 or by e-mailing joel@jgluck.org. Thanks to Tom Webb for his invaluable support.

Psolodrama—with its invitation to inhabit roles, change roles, and develop interactions—has opened me to a new way of being moved while doing authentic movement. Each role has its own quality of energy and its own set of feelings and bodily sensations. Experiencing these qualities, feelings, and sensations while I silently (or not so silently) shift roles in authentic movement, allows me to be present to my body’s reactions both to the roles and to the interactions between roles. Some part of me may honor, question, laugh at, push, or scold another part, and that interaction often magically draws me into my movement and begins to dictate in surprising ways what comes next.

— Tom Webb

At the weekend workshop in June, I felt like a kid who'd had the training wheels removed from her bike; suddenly I was at ease with the way everything worked, and I could ride. In psolodrama, it's fascinating to embody one aspect of myself, then morph into another, and get the two in dialogue. So often I've been surprised and enlightened by the truths these parts of me speak—things that might never occur to my plodding, everyday mind. It's also thrilling to ride the whim of my imagination, and find myself turning in directions that make no logical sense but that have their own intention, which usually proves enlightening.

Last weekend [in September], working on the five roles—the protagonist and various auxiliary players who can prompt the action along—I began to feel as if I was moving up from a three-speed to a touring bike. I am so excited by the psolodrama form. It's fabulous for the performer side of me, since it limbers up my imagination and my improvisational muscles. It's a good fit for my meditator self, as I work to develop a compassionate witness for all that goes on in my crazy life and around me. And it also feels rewardingly therapeutic; the more I work with the inner archetypes that arise, the more they change and grow right before my eyes.

— a workshop participant