

*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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*To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.*

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## Warming Up to Psolodrama

*spring begins—  
even for a gate  
without grass*

*spring begins—  
at least I'm human  
fifty years now*

*my ramshackle hut—  
just as it is...  
spring begins*

— *Issa*

As in psychodrama, psolodrama has three phases: the warm-up, the action (psolodrama itself), and the warm-down or sharing phase.

Warming up enhances the experience of psolodrama, by helping us enter the process with a relaxed body and an open mind. When practicing psolodrama with a peer, we can warm-up by using a variety of exercises to help connect with our partner, become more present, get the voice and body engaged and limber, and spark the imagination.

This chapter contains warm-ups I have personally found helpful—for myself, my clients, the groups I work with, and for peer practice—from verbal check-in and clearing, to sitting meditation and authentic movement, to fun and energizing improv games such as Impulse Dialogue, Role Dialogue, and “Yes!” Improvisation.

But “warming up” can also be thought of in the longer-term sense of learning the skills needed to master a new practice. The second half of this chapter describes training prerequisites and additional exercises used when learning psolodrama, including The Empty Chair, The Five Roles, and Life/Dream Scene.

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## Preparing for a Psolodrama Session

### Readying the Environment and Yourself

When practicing psolodrama, start by finding a comfortable environment for your warm-up and practice. A good-sized empty space with a clean floor will give you room to roll, stretch, and roam. Although psolodrama can be done in a few square meters on the floor of one's bedroom, a spacious movement studio with a wooden dance floor is a perfect setting. Some may also prefer to work on a carpet or rug or even outdoors. It's also nice to have cushions to sit on. Temperature and lighting should be comfortable. However, do not let the search for an ideal space delay your practice.

Sound is an issue. Minimize interruptions by turning off all phones and alarms, close doors/windows if necessary. Choose a space where you will not be overheard, or use a white noise maker outside the door to mask sound.

Other parts of the preparatory ritual before a psolodrama session might include changing into clothes more comfortable for moving in, not eating right beforehand, and making sure other work is complete and put away so you can completely focus on the here and now.

### Checking In, Clearing, and Establishing Ground Rules

When working with a partner, it is always beneficial to start with some kind of a check-in. This can be a brief "how are you today?" (if the answer is "I'm fine," say more, because "fine" can mean many things!) or a deeper ritual, reviewing recent events in your lives.

One kind of check-in I particularly value is **clearing**: each person says whatever he or she needs to in order to be fully present. Clearing is valuable not only to the speaker, who gets to “clear out” all the thoughts and feelings that may be humming along in the background (and unconsciously driving him), but also to the listener, who later on will be serving in the role of witness. Listening to another’s clearing is a perfect warm-up to the attentive, non-judgmental, supportive stance of the witness—and also informs the listener’s understanding of their partner.

**Ground Rules.** If you and your partner are new to one another, it is important to discuss any ground rules you’d like to have for your work together. Confidentiality may be the most important one: agreeing that any aspect of the work and anything shared between psoloist and witness will not leave the room. Explicitly agreeing on confidentiality beforehand creates a safer, stronger container, helping the psoloist be more open and vulnerable, go deeper, and have a richer experience.

### **Warm-Up Activities**

Psolodrama itself plus the sharing process afterwards can typically take 30-40 minutes per person, so given time constraints one either needs to be selective or do short versions of warm-ups. (More on planning a warm-up sequence appears at the end of this section.)

Everyone is different: one person may prefer a series of warm-up exercises while another might like to jump right in. As we’ll see in the next chapter, psolodrama has a kind of built-in set of warm-ups called “entryway practices,” so experienced practitioners

often find that not a lot else is needed. For those new to psolodrama, however, it can be very helpful to begin more gradually, to ready the body and mind for what's to come.

My wise friend Christopher Ellinger says that the first question to ask when warming up is “What do I need?”— physically, emotionally, vocally, and in other ways. Here are some possible answers to that question.

### **Meditation**

Meditation can be a wonderful way to begin the warm-up period. This can be as simple as agreeing on an amount of time to sit in silence. Or, the two can agree on what type(s) of meditation to practice, e.g., *samadhi*, *vipassana*, *metta*, or more active forms such as walking meditation, metta dialogue, etc. (see Part I of this book for ideas and options). If preferred, one person can facilitate the progression, offering a guided meditation. No matter what the type of meditation, this activity can help participants become more present, attain deeper levels of focus and awareness, and let go of surface or day-to-day issues.

Being fully present, aware of mind and body in the here and now, is essential for practicing psolodrama effectively. By meditating first, we open up to a more subtle level of observation, inviting creativity and intuition, which later, in the entryway to psolodrama, creates the space for inner imagery and archetypal roles to appear.

Note that some may prefer to do a physical warm-up first—stretching, yoga, authentic movement, etc.—prior to meditation, as a way to free the body and be more present in one's sitting.

## **Authentic Movement, SAM, and SIAM**

Practicing psolodrama always renews my respect for the power of one of its root forms, authentic movement. If there is sufficient time, one of the best warm-ups for psolodrama is to practice the pure authentic movement form, taking turns witnessing and being witnessed. Each movement period can be followed optionally by a short period of writing or drawing, followed by brief sharing. Variations can include inviting the witness to move in response to the mover.

If time is tighter, or there is a desire to get into working with roles sooner, a common pre-psolodrama warm-up is to do something a bit unorthodox: both participants do authentic movement simultaneously, with no witness. To an experienced mover this may sound odd: the role of witness is considered core to authentic movement. However, an experienced mover can move by herself, and bring her own inner witness to bear, treating the movement as an active meditation. In my own experience, doing **simultaneous authentic movement (“SAM”)** with a partner, but with no witness, helps me tune into my body and allows me to move freely. I become much more present to all the senses and to my intuition, and more deeply relax and release the stresses of the day.

More experienced movers may also wish to agree beforehand on whether to invite physical contact—**simultaneous interactive authentic movement (“SIAM”)**. For some, physical contact while warming up is a distraction; for others, it’s an opportunity to open further and connect.

Some agreement should also be made about the use of sound—another form of contact (e.g., “let’s do the first five minutes in silence, and in the second five minutes allow sound to come.”)

Following simultaneous movement, drawing/writing and/or sharing are all possible, but not necessary—SAM/SIAM can be a jumping off point directly into the activities that follow.

*(See Part I, the chapter on “Authentic Movement,” for more on the practice, as well as variations including SAM and SIAM.)*

### **Improvising with Your Partner**

Following meditation and/or authentic movement, partners can raise the energy level by improvising together with movement, sound, words, and roles. Here is a series of three fun pair exercises that build on one another and work well before psolodrama—Impulse Dialogue, Role Dialogue, and Yes! Improvisation:

In an **Impulse Dialogue**, one person begins with a brief sound and movement impulse, and then stops. The other responds with a different sound and movement impulse, and then stops. As the exercise continues, the result is a kind of dialogue. Unlike a traditional acting exercise, however, the Impulse Dialogue is rooted in authentic movement—instead of “performing” for or reacting solely to one’s partner, one gives equal attention to one’s internal experience—bodily sensations, internal imagery, emotions, etc. Whereas in a traditional sound and movement acting exercise, one might clap and say “HA!”—sending the impulse directly to one’s partner—in an Impulse Dialogue, one is just as likely to gently groan and collapse to the floor in a heap. Eyes can be open or closed at any time, and physical contact is possible.

In Impulse Dialogue (and Role Dialogue, below), the pause between impulses is a special moment, an invitation to stop, breathe, and listen with awareness. The improviser is not only listening to his partner (listening for the “cue” when her next impulse is



finished), but also to himself: he opens with mindfulness to his body, his breath, his own emotional state, all of his sense doors. He may notice his planning mind, already wanting to think up what his next impulse will be—and he lets it go. Instead, when it's his turn again, he opens to what his body wants to do, letting it express both physically and with sound.

A typical impulse is one to six seconds long. Note that in order for the exercise to work, the improviser must make a sound along with his physical impulse, so that his partner will know when his impulse is over (she may have her eyes closed or be facing away from him). If his impulse is silent, and his partner does not get the cue to begin, he can either replay his first impulse with sound, or have another, different impulse with sound.

The **Role Dialogue** is similar to the Impulse Dialogue, but instead of inviting a sound/movement impulse, the first improviser begins with a role or character “impulse,” informed by her physical position and how she feels in that moment. She moves, sounds, and/or speaks in that role, briefly, and then stops. Her pause is the other improviser's signal to have a role impulse of his own.

Roles can be imaginary or real people, animals, objects, etc. Speaking is OK, and as the dialogue continues small scenes often occur spontaneously. However, in a Role Dialogue, unlike a standard partner improv scene, each person's role/character impulse may be occurring in an entirely different reality. There is no responsibility to connect with the other person, through eye contact or physically. However, when these connections occur, and some link is made between very different roles, the results can range from the absurd or comical, to unexpectedly emotional or meaningful.

Finally, in a **Yes! Improvisation**, the pair can improvise freely together without pausing, with one rule: each must say “yes” to any new impulse, role, scene, or reality introduced by the other. However, once a scene is established, each person has the option of continuing the scene or shifting to a new reality/new character. Unlike the Role Dialogue, the Yes! Improv demands that both partners, as quickly as possible, enter the same reality—to make sense, in some way, of their relationship and what is happening. Often, the results are absurd, wild, and comical. But some scenes can be serious, or even disturbing, as the pair taps into deeper themes. The challenge in the Yes! Improv is to maintain the same level of mindful awareness discovered in the Impulse Dialogue, so as not to lose touch with one’s own body, one’s center.

(Yes! Improvisation was inspired by master improv teachers Daena Giardella and Ruth Zaporah. In the drama therapy world, its closest analog is Johnson’s Developmental Transformations.)

The sequence of Impulse Dialogue, Role Dialogue, and “Yes!” Improvisation accomplishes several things at once: it more thoroughly engages the body and voice; it deepens the connection between the partners by inviting interaction and contact; it adds a high-energy, playful quality to the warm-up (particularly in the “Yes!” Improv); and it introduces the playing of roles as a new element—an important faculty to warm-up before entering psolodrama, especially for those new to the practice.

### **Planning a Warm-up Sequence and Timing**

Following the check-in, experienced practitioners usually plan their warm-up sequence in advance, allocating timing to each step and deciding who will keep time. One advantage of advance planning is that each subsequent step of the warm-up can flow right

from the last—there is no need to stop and discuss what the next step should be. For example, it is especially nice to be able to transition directly into authentic movement from one’s sitting meditation (I often suggest that my partner and I not even clear our sitting cushions, but let the movement start right from the sitting posture).

Given limited time, it may be necessary to choose only one or two warm-ups—and as mentioned early, for experienced psoloists a warm-up following the check-in may not even be necessary. Different warm-ups serve different needs—and each person may need something different. I try to pick warm-ups I think will help counterbalance the state I find myself in. For example, if I’m already in a high-energy, playful mood, I may need to slow down and enter a more contemplative state using meditation and authentic movement. Likewise, if I’m already relaxed and present, or my energy is low, the three improv activities (Impulse Dialogue, etc.) can help warm up my imagination, body, and voice to better prepare me for playing roles. If you and your partner have opposite needs, try having each person pick their own favorite warm-up, and divide up the time.

Following the check-in, a thorough 30 minute warm-up sequence could work as follows:

- Silent Meditation: 10 minutes
- Simultaneous Authentic Movement: 5 minutes separately and in silence, 5 minutes allowing sound and/or physical contact
- Impulse Dialogue: 3 minutes
- Role Dialogue: 3 minutes
- “Yes!” Improvisation: 4 minutes

A different approach is to agree on the order but let the timing be more fluid—allow one or both partners to signal a transition whenever they feel it is time to move on to the next activity.

### **Other Possibilities**

Any expressive activity can make a good warm-up to psolodrama. Other Insight Improvisation activities that can work well include Movement Meditation, the Three States, FreeSong, Amplification, and the many variations on these activities appearing elsewhere in this book. Other kinds of sound and movement, vocalizing/singing, and improvisational movement/dance or theater exercises can also be included. What's important is to choose warm-ups that both partners feel comfortable with and enjoy and that prepare mind, body, and voice to be relaxed and available.

### **Training**

A good deal of psolodrama's power as a practice is that it is unplanned and unstructured—truly an open canvas or stage to create or explore anything. However, without training or outside guidance a new psoloist can feel confused, overwhelmed, or lost. With training, he learns what to do in these situations: how to return to authentic movement, be inspired by bodily awareness, access supportive roles such as the director and the double, etc.

To practice psolodrama fully and skillfully, the psoloist greatly benefits from a firm grounding in its foundations: meditation, authentic movement, theatrical improvisation, and psychodrama.

**In one-to-one therapy**, I typically introduce meditation as well as the entryway exercises gradually over time—authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream (see next chapter, “The Entryway to Psolodrama,” for details, and see earlier chapters for descriptions of each of these exercises or practices). In parallel, I teach the concepts of psychodrama through exercises such as the Empty Chair (described below) and Couple/Family Therapy, as well as psychodrama itself. Once all of these have been experienced and understood, introducing psolodrama is a relatively simple task. *(See Part IV, the chapter entitled “Working with Individuals,” for more information on the Couple/Family Therapy exercise and other approaches to individual therapy using Insight Improvisation.)*

**In a workshop setting**, training a group in psolodrama typically requires two to three days. The agenda includes meditation, authentic movement, psychodrama, shared vipassana, role stream, scene stream, and psolodrama itself, and given sufficient time can also include the Empty Chair, the Five Roles, Life/Dream Scene, sung psolodrama, and other exercises. Much of the learning occurs through working in dyads; by witnessing and sharing with one another, participants quickly develop strong empathic bonds, as well as a greater understanding of the therapeutic processes and container underlying psolodrama. *(See Part IV, the chapter entitled “Working with Groups,” for more information on leading an Insight Improvisation workshop.)*

Below is a summary of key exercises useful for training in psolodrama, as well as full-length descriptions of those exercises not included in other chapters:

## Authentic Movement

Understanding and experiencing authentic movement—described in detail in the Authentic Movement chapter in Part I of this book—is essential to the practice of psolodrama.

From authentic movement, the psoloist learns how to follow the body and “be moved,” rather than control the movement with her mind. In a broader sense, she learns how to follow impulse—inner imagery, role, emotion, and “gut feel”—and distinguish those organic impulses from the “good ideas” of the planning/judging mind. Authentic movement also teaches her how to improvise with eyes closed, how to enter empty rather than plan in advance what to work on, and how to let go in the presence of the witness and not perform for them. Finally, as mover, she is learning how to develop her own supportive and nonjudgmental inner witness, modeled by the supportive and nonjudgmental qualities of her witnessing partner.

There are many learnings as an authentic movement witness, as well, that can be applied to the witness role in psolodrama: being fully present and treating witnessing as a meditation with the mover as the object; bringing nonjudgmental and unconditional support to the mover; and in the sharing process learning how to be a mirror for the mover, and to use language in a caring way that conveys the subjective nature of the witness’s point of view.

In addition to standard authentic movement, certain variations—described in greater detail in the authentic movement chapter in Part I—are particularly useful as preparation for learning psolodrama:

**The “Lenses of Awareness”** invites mover and witness to observe what is happening through a range of perspectives—to see the unfolding of experience through different lenses. This can help both partners break out of habitual patterns of seeing and doing. (*See also the exercise “Witnessing For” in Part III, “Witnessing Psolodrama.”*)

**Authentic movement with images and childhood memories**, coupled with the sharing of “image-story-image,” develops the skills of tapping into and embodying inner imagery, and the ability to enact a personal story in the first-person—all useful in psolodrama.

### **“Entryway” Practices**

The four main steps in the **“entryway to psolodrama”—authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream**—are not only rich and deep practices in themselves, but are also useful training steps that can be practiced independently without proceeding to psolodrama. All four are described in detail in their own chapters earlier in this book; the next chapter discusses how they are used as a progression together leading directly into psolodrama.

### **Embodying Sensations and Emotions**

This exercise, based on the Process Work of Arnold Mindell, is about learning to listen deeply to the body, one of the fundamental skills needed when doing psolodrama. The exercise is also useful in itself as a way to understand what messages the body may be sending us, and what emotions, images, memories, and roles are stored in different parts of the body.

We can choose to use either a physical sensation or an emotion as the basis of the exercise. Pick something that you might ordinarily ignore—what Mindell would call a secondary process. Here’s how to work with a body sensation (to use an emotion, simply substitute “emotion” for “sensation” in these instructions):

The exercise begins either in meditation (standing, sitting, or lying down) or in authentic movement. With the eyes closed, become aware of the body, noticing bodily sensations. Next, focus in on one sensation. It could be one that is standing out in this moment (e.g. an ache in the belly, a vibration in the arm, a slight dizziness), or a sensation that has been present over time (e.g. a chronic back pain).

As you meditate on that sensation, allow it to slowly expand out from its current location, to begin to fill the body. For example, if it’s an ache in your belly, imagine and let yourself feel that ache gradually spread out through your torso, and into your arms, legs, and head. As it spreads, feel that feeling and allow it to affect your body posture/position, the expression on your face, the way you breathe, etc. Allow sounds to come that express that feeling—for example, as that achy feeling spreads I may find myself curling up and emitting an “urrrrrrggggghhhhh” sound. Continue to amplify that feeling, allowing yourself to move and make sounds. Allow words to come—what is this feeling saying? Let it speak to you: what message does it have for you? For example, my belly ache may say (in a very achy voice): “I’m sad...stressed out...I need a break. Why do you keep working all the time? I need to breathe. I need space. Let me rest.”

This exercise can be useful as a form of therapy, as training for psolodrama, and also as a launching-off point when practicing psolodrama, by having the protagonist



respond to the what the sensation/emotion is saying and develop a dialogue between the two roles.

### The Empty Chair

This technique, developed originally by Moreno, and then adapted by Fritz Perls in Gestalt Therapy, reduces psychodrama to its very essence: a protagonist speaking to a single, imagined auxiliary ego. It is called the Empty Chair because it begins with the protagonist sitting or standing facing an empty chair. The therapist/director asks the protagonist: “Take a look in this chair—who do you see sitting there?” They can further add:

*Imagine someone from your life, someone you would like to talk with. It may be a loved one, or someone you really miss and wish you could speak to. Or it may be someone you have unfinished business with. This person may be alive or dead. See that person now... How do they look, sitting there? What are they wearing? How is that person sitting? What’s the expression on their face? Notice how you feel right now in their presence.*

When the protagonist is ready, he begins to speak to the imagined person in the empty chair. This usually takes the form of an extended monologue, facilitated by the therapist’s further questions and exhortations (e.g., “If you could speak your complete truth in this moment, what would you say to [the empty chair person]?”).

There are a couple of variations on the empty chair exercise that I find particularly useful in workshop settings when training participants to do psolodrama:

### Group Empty Chair

Similar to what is described above, except that the entire group is standing, in an arc, facing a single empty chair. The group is given the instruction simultaneously to look into the empty chair and see who is there. The facilitator then visits each participant in turn, asks them to say aloud who is in the empty chair (this should be brief, e.g., “my mother,” or “an old teacher of mine”), and invites them to say something to that person. Although by necessity this version of the exercise is condensed—each participant gets to say a sentence or two—it often invites an unexpectedly strong expression of emotion. As the exercise proceeds, each participant’s sharing inspires the next one to go deeper, bringing tears of sadness, as well as surfacing deep, unexpressed anger.

In Thailand, where I have led this exercise many times, a wide range of emotion and physical expression is often elicited. If the empty chair figure is a deceased relative or loved one, participants will often move toward the chair, sit at the feet of the empty chair figure, lay a head in their invisible lap, hug them, and weep openly. In the case of someone they feel angry toward, I have seen participants kick the chair over and scream at the empty chair figure. (In Thailand, where great importance is placed on proper behavior and showing respect and restraint in hierarchical relationships, participants’ strong reactions to the exercise may in part be a response to the pressures created by those societal norms. The exercise becomes a safe container to express feelings that are usually hidden in day-to-day life.)

Note that if the group is too large, or if the facilitator wishes to work more deeply with individuals, a single protagonist can face the empty chair, with the group seated

along both sides of the space, lending support, and one member from each side waiting “on-deck” to be the next protagonist.

### **The Four Chairs**

This variation on empty chair introduces two new concepts: doubling and role reversal. Participants work in pairs or trios, each having four chairs arranged so that two chairs are side-by-side facing the other two. (A demonstration of how the exercise works can be helpful beforehand, especially for groups new to doubling and role-reversal.) The two active participants sit next to one another so that the one volunteering to be the protagonist is in the “driver’s” seat (on the left) and the other—designated to be the double—is in the “passenger’s” seat—each is facing an empty chair. (If working in a trio, the third person sits to the side, witnessing from the outside, and can provide coaching or support if asked for or needed by the protagonist.)

The exercise begins with the protagonist looking to see who is in the empty chair, and then briefly telling the double (e.g., “I see my grandmother—my mother’s mother”). As the protagonist then begins to speak to the empty chair figure, the double starts by simply mirroring the protagonist physically, now and then repeating key words or phrases—the role of the double is first to empathize with (and, by doing so, reinforce and support) the feelings of the protagonist. As the exercise continues, the double begins to venture guesses as to the deeper feelings and thoughts the protagonist may be having, and speaks those aloud in the first person (e.g., “Grandma, I’m really sad.”); the rule is that the protagonist must respond in some way to the double, either by repeating the line (if he agrees with the double), or by correcting it (e.g., “No, it’s not that I’m sad—it’s more that I’m angry...”). Note that both partners speak only in first person, directly to the empty

chair figure facing them. It's also important that the double not lead the action—the double needs to allow sufficient space for new thoughts and feelings to emerge from the protagonist.

At a certain point, the facilitator of the exercise says: “Now reverse roles.” (Alternatively, this can be an organic decision on the part of the protagonist.) The two then get up and move to the seats directly facing them. If the group is new to reversing roles, the facilitator might encourage both protagonist and double to get into the new role, adjusting their posture, body language, and voice to match the empty chair (now auxiliary ego) role. As the protagonist-as-auxiliary speaks, the double at first mirrors, but gradually can begin to venture guesses as to the deeper thoughts/feelings of the auxiliary ego—which the protagonist-as-auxiliary can either repeat, or instead say what feels really true for that role.

After a little bit, the facilitator then says: “Now feel free to reverse roles at any time.” Pairs continue the exercise, with the protagonist-auxiliary dialogue continuing for several more minutes, and the protagonist determining when role reversal should occur. The facilitator tells everyone that they have a minute or two left to find an ending. Afterward, sharing in the small groups is encouraged. The protagonist can say anything he'd like about his experience; the double (and witness/coach, if there is one) offers psychodramatic sharing—what resonated for them personally in the dialogue—neither analyzing nor giving advice about the situation.

The “Four Chairs” version of the empty chair is effective because participants get to work in intimate pairs or trios and ideally form a close bond between the protagonist and the double. If the double does her job well, and is able to deeply empathize with the

protagonist, the protagonist feels fully supported by her, to the point where the double practically disappears—her presence and words simply and subtly facilitating an emotional deepening of the process. Supported in this way, the dialogue often exposes hidden feelings, which can lead to cathartic release as well as new insights—not only about the relationship with the auxiliary, but also often bigger insights into the protagonist’s life, patterns, and/or family history.

### **What the Empty Chair Teaches**

For psolodrama training, the Empty Chair introduces and practices the skill of speaking to an invisible other, but it does this in a structured, contained way: in the Empty Chair the other is in a physical chair, whereas in psolodrama the invisible other(s) one is speaking to can be anywhere. In the Four Chairs, participants also practice role reversal and doubling, two other fundamental psolodramatic skills.

One question that sometimes comes up with participants new to the process is how to play the auxiliary ego role: “I do not know what she would say.” This is an important question that lies not only at the heart of psychodrama and the Empty Chair exercise, but is also intrinsic to psolodrama. One answer to this question is “go with the first thought that comes to mind.” Another answer could be: “Allow yourself to imagine this dialogue is really happening, right now. As you get into the role of [your grandma], feel in your gut what feels right for her to say. Take it slowly and only speak what you feel—which sometimes might be to say ‘I do not know what to say to you.’ If you can deeply empathize with [your grandma], you will know what is right to say.”

It’s important to underscore that there is no responsibility to play an auxiliary ego accurately—it is acknowledged that the portrayal is, by nature, completely subjective (the

very term “auxiliary ego” emphasizes the subjective/projective nature of the role). What the auxiliary ego often really represents is an unacknowledged part of ourselves.

The process of imagining and embodying the auxiliary role is perhaps the most fundamental element behind the power of psychodrama and psolodrama. By putting oneself in a role and allowing oneself to empathize with, to imagine, how the other feels—to enter, embrace, and trust the surplus reality (rather than negate it or not trust it by saying: “I do not, cannot know what the other is feeling or would say”)—a new possibility is unlocked that provides a pathway into deeper self-understanding, as well as understanding of the other.

### Psychodrama

Psychodrama, so valuable in itself, is a foundational form of training for psolodrama. Working with a good psychodrama director, having a chance to practice role reversal, and to play the roles of protagonist, auxiliary ego, and double, can help the new psoloist understand those techniques and roles, an awareness he can apply directly in his psolodramas. Once he has gained some experience, it is also very helpful to practice directing psychodrama. To do this, one can take a course or join (or form) a practice group—an opportunity for peers (such as students studying creative arts therapy together) to gain experience directing one another, to share ideas, coach one another, etc.

*(See Additional Resources at the end of this chapter for helpful books and websites for learning and practicing psychodrama.)*

## The Five Roles

In early attempts to teach psolodrama in workshop settings, I discovered that participants needed further training in being able to draw upon the various psychodramatic roles. The standard Empty Chair exercise is useful for creating dialogue between protagonist and auxiliary ego, but psolodrama incorporates three other roles—the double, the director, and the group (in psolodrama called “the audience”).

Thus the “Five Roles” exercise was born—a sort of “psolodrama with training wheels.” Below are the basic instructions to practice with a peer, but it is easily adapted to teach in a workshop, with participants working in psoloist/witness pairs. The witness or group facilitator can lead the psoloist(s) through the following steps. Each step can be roughly one to three minutes. When working one-to-one with a peer, rather than timing each step, it’s best for the witness to sense what is needed and respond accordingly:

1. **Begin with authentic movement.** Enter the space, close your eyes, and allow yourself to follow your body. (I recommend continuing with eyes closed throughout the entire exercise to maintain focus on your inner experience and avoid “performing.”)
2. **Choose an auxiliary ego.** Imagine someone you’d like to talk to. It could be anyone from your life, living or dead, a historical person, or even an imaginary being or force of nature. (Note: this exercise works best when choosing an auxiliary ego who is a distinct “other,” separate from the protagonist. Try not to pick yourself as the “someone” you’d like to talk to—choose someone else.)

3. **Speak as the protagonist.** As yourself, begin to speak to that other person or being.
4. **Reverse roles and speak as the auxiliary.** When you're ready, become the other. Move and speak as them, as if they were responding to you. What would they say? If you are unsure, follow your intuition—what might you say if you were in their shoes?
5. **Continue the dialogue.** Now at any time you can reverse roles between yourself and the other, creating a dialogue between the two.
6. **Bring in the double.** What are you not saying in this scene? Find the double's voice. Allow yourself to speak the hidden feelings or truths that you are not saying aloud in the scene so far. What would you really like to say to the other person? Let the double express anger, sadness, unexpressed desires or needs—whatever the hidden “elephant in the room” is.
7. **Continue the scene.** Feel free to move between protagonist, auxiliary ego, and double. (You can also experiment with doubling the auxiliary ego, if you like—each character can have their own double expressing their innermost truth.)
8. **Add the director.** What would you (the protagonist) like to ask your inner wise mind, or say to it? What might a good coach ask or say at this point? When becoming the director, notice what makes the role unique—how would the wise part of you appear physically? How would they speak? What questions might they ask? Dialogue between protagonist and director for a bit,



and see if this leads to a change of scene or some new step. Continue the drama, incorporating the director role.

Note that the director role is ideally that of the “wise counselor” who asks good questions that lead the protagonist to find his own next steps—rather than a dictator telling the protagonist what to do. The director may ask, “How do you feel right now?” and then possibly, “What do you need?”

9. **Introduce the audience.** The audience is someone who has watched this whole drama play out. Speak as them. They may be an inner critic, a supportive voice, or something different. Then become the protagonist and respond to the audience. The audience can get involved in the scene—e.g. by arguing with the protagonist, or by proposing a whole new approach and demonstrating it.
10. **Find an ending.** Find an ending to the drama which is satisfying to you.  
(Optional: find a way to honor or thank all the roles that helped out along the way.)

When done, debrief with your partner. What was your experience of this drama? What was it like to play the five roles? The witness can share what she saw and heard, as well as how the drama resonated for her personally.

### **Variations**

As described above, the initial stages of the Five Roles follow the pattern described in the Empty Chair exercise (above). There are two variations on the Five Roles that move the process closer to psolodrama:

If the psoloist knows the role stream exercise, it is possible to start with authentic movement and role stream, become a role and speak as it, and then reverse roles and have the protagonist (“yourself”) speak to that auxiliary ego. The exercise can then continue from step five, above.

Another variation is to do role stream and scene stream, get two characters to dialogue, and then continue from step six. In this case, the psoloist can either decide who the protagonist is, let that distinction go, or bring in the protagonist separately in step eight, to dialogue with the director about the scene so far.

### Life/Dream Scene

Life/Dream Scene is an improvisational structure that can be used one-to-one or in a workshop setting.

Instructions: “Think of a moment from your life, something fairly recent, from the last few days or week—any moment where you were interacting with someone else—that stands out in your mind. It could be a moment of conflict, connection, realization, etc. Then, putting that aside for a minute, now think of a dream you have had. It might be a recent dream, or alternatively one you remember from the past because you had it repeatedly. Pick one character from that dream. We will call this the *dream figure*. (Do not share this information aloud.) Your task now is this: begin to act out the real-life moment as faithfully as you can—you will play all the roles. At some point in your enactment, the dream figure enters the scene. From here on in, the scene is an improvisation. Discover what happens when the dream figure enters the real-life situation—what changes? Don’t plan it in advance; let the scene unfold moment by moment. Let it surprise you.”

For example:

**Protagonist:** *Mom, if you'd like to have us over for Thanksgiving at your apartment, why can't we stay over? It seems very expensive, inconvenient, and not fun, to find a hotel.*

**Mother:** *It's perfectly normal to stay at a hotel when visiting. I have many friends who do not have a big enough apartment—when their children visit they stay in a hotel.*

**Protagonist:** *But you have an enormous apartment with two extra beds!*

*(The dream figure enters—a strange, evil looking woman with a large German Shepherd on a leash.)*

**Protagonist:** *Sorry Mom, I have to go... (hangs up) excuse me, ma'am I didn't realize this conference room was being used.*

**Woman:** *don't leave*

**Protagonist:** *No it's fine—I'm done with my call.*

**Woman** *(looking protagonist in the eye): you must call your mother*

**Protagonist:** *What? What are you talking about? I just spoke with her.*

**Woman:** *DO IT NOW!*

**Dog** *(growls at protagonist): Rrrrrrrr...*

**Protagonist:** *OK, OK!*

*(...and the scene continues...)*

Although the premise of Life/Dream Scene makes it sound like a performance—and in fact it can be quite engaging for the witness or group—the exercise works best when the improviser enters with no expectations, just sticking to the task given and staying open to what happens (not trying to be “clever” or “good”).

As training, Life/Dream Scene helps develop a similar attitude when approaching psolodrama: to stay open to what’s arising and allow a scene to develop. In addition, it provides practice in role reversal and the use of surplus reality—particularly in the way the dream figure changes the real-life story into something completely unexpected.

### **Additional Training**

The exercises described in Parts I & II of this book—**active meditations** as well as **theatrical exercises based in mindfulness**—are excellent training for psolodrama. Each exercise helps develop mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness; Being Mind rather than Performance Mind; and each teaches the budding psoloist how to enter empty, let go of his good ideas, and follow his body, inner imagery, and intuition. Within those chapters, a few exercises are especially useful training for psolodrama; they include: the One-Minute Solo, which helps one develop the capacity to let go, relax, and listen to inner impulse; Amplification, which stretches the body and voice toward greater expressiveness that in turn can help bring roles and scenes to life; and FreeSong, which helps the psoloist tap into the power of singing, connecting the voice and the heart, and taking one’s psolodrama to another level of expressive power and emotional self-exploration.

Being well-grounded in **actor training** and having the opportunity to experiment with **group and individual improvisation** are invaluable preparations for psolodrama. In particular I'd recommend: actor training in the tradition of Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre (1968), Roy Hart (Pikes, 1999) and Linklater (1976) vocal training, van Itallie's Playwriting on Your Feet (1997), Zaporah's Action Theater (1995), Kelman's approach to improvisation (elements of which are described in the chapter in Part II of this book entitled "Naked Improvisation"), and Boal's theater games (1992).

**Other forms of creative arts therapy and psychotherapy**—including those mentioned in the last chapter, "Foundations of Psolodrama"—can enrich one's practice of psolodrama. These include other approaches to drama therapy, such as Landy's Role Theory/Technique (1996), Johnson's Developmental Transformations (2009), Lewis's Embodied Psyche Technique (2000, p. 268), and the practice of self-revelatory theater (Rubin, 2007); Mindell's Process-Oriented Psychology or Process Work (1985), Agazarian's Systems-Centered Therapy (2004), Schwartz's Internal Family Systems (2013), Gendlin's Focusing (1982), the practice of co-counseling (CCI-USA, 2014), as well as talk therapy integrating mindfulness and meditation (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2013).

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## Additional Resources

Blatner, A. (1996). *Acting-in: practical applications of psychodramatic methods* (3rd ed.). NY: Springer.

Leveton, E. (1992). *A clinician's guide to psychodrama*. NY: Springer.

*For more information on drama therapy, visit The North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA) online at <http://www.nadta.org>.*

*Further information on psychodrama can be found at The American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama (ASGPP) online at <http://www.asgpp.org>.*