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# **Alterations of Consciousness during Psychodrama and Sociodrama**

Scholarly Essay

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# **Alterations of Consciousness during Psychodrama and Sociodrama**

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### ***Abstract***

Psychodrama and sociodrama participants in general, and protagonists in particular, often report that during a session their conscious experience is altered. Many are in fact drawn to experiential methods by their desire for this experience of heightened awareness. Psychodrama will be seen as altering most of the 14 dimensions of changed subjective experience that characterise altered states of consciousness (ASC's). Psychodramatists need to be aware of both the dangers and benefits of experiencing altered states. As in hypnosis, the director needs to be especially careful not to elicit false memories or make strong suggestions.

### ***Key Words:***

Altered states of consciousness, psychodrama, suggestibility, false memories

## ***Introduction***

Throughout history humanity has been drawn to experiment with different means of altering consciousness, such as drugs, meditation, mysticism, hypnosis, drumming, ritual, ecstatic trance, sex, peak experience, sensory deprivation, biofeedback and, even, pain. Many followers of the human potential movement and clients in psychotherapy aspire to transform their consciousness. For some this desire for heightened awareness and living in the moment is the main reason they are drawn to experiential methods, such as psychodrama, sociodrama, drama therapy, bioenergetics, gestalt therapy, holotropic breathing, rebirthing, encounter groups, or primal therapy. Improvisational acting also alters the actor's consciousness, such as is heard in Ruth Zaporah's *Action Theater*. "*This practice turns the mind inside out*" (Zaporah, 1995, p. xxi).

Using the definitions and classifications presented in a prominent textbook (Farthing, 1992), this article investigates how these methods relate to the psychology of consciousness field. Experiences during psychodrama will be seen to fit Farthing's definition of Altered State of Consciousness (ASC). Note that the goal of the paper is not to promote ASC as a (new or old) form of treatment, rather to create awareness that ASC often occur in psychodrama as currently practised, whether intended to or not. While the focus is on psychodrama in the remainder of the article, most of the observations also hold true for sociodrama and related techniques.

The point that ASC experiences are beneficial has been made by many authors (most prominently Leary 1968; Grof 1980, 1993). I am not necessarily agreeing that ASC's in psychodrama *should* be encouraged, rather that I will show they occur, whether the practitioner encourages them or not. The last part of the article reflects on both the desirable and undesirable implications.

Farthing (1992) classifies such states as sleeping, dreaming, hypnosis, meditation, and drug-induced states as ASCs. His definition reads that

"An altered state of consciousness (ASC) may be defined as a temporary change in the overall pattern of subjective experience, such that the individual believes that his or her mental functioning is distinctly different from certain general norms for his or her normal waking state of consciousness".

Farthing (1992, p. 205)

It is worth noting that Farthing defines an ASC as a *subjective* experience. At least until now, psychologists have not found an objective way to determine from the outside whether someone is in an ASC. In particular, there is no consistent brain wave pattern corresponding to ASC, or any other measurable physiological response (Farthing 1992, p.206; Wulff 2000, p.405). In the absence of instrumentation, researchers are left to question the subjects directly about their experience.

Farthing lists fourteen dimensions of changed subjective experience, several of which need to be altered to be in an ASC. Thus to establish whether psychodrama typically induces an ASC, one needs to show that it alters several of these dimensions. The following descriptions give explanations for the fourteen dimensions and demonstrate how they are altered during psychodrama.

## ***Dimensions of Altered Consciousness***

### **1. Attention**

Psychodrama involves highly focused attention to everything that happens in the moment. Even when re-enacting a past event, attention is focused on the experience in the here and now, interacting with auxiliary egos. It is characteristic of psychodrama that past events are not just remembered and analysed, but they are brought into the present. This living in the moment is of course a goal that is accomplished to varying degrees.

"To relax our attention into the present moment is extraordinarily simple, but, for most of us, it demands a lifetime of practice"

Zaporah (1995, p. xx)

In both psychodrama and acting, training directors employ techniques to help the actor to be fully present and to make the experience "real", as-if it were happening right now. This is the reason for using scene setting, sound effects, impromptu costumes, lights and other theatrical devices. Attention to the elements of the scene is heightened, whereas attention to other events is diminished to the background. The actors live in a different reality and therefore it is important that they are in a safe and protected environment.

## 2. Perception

The protagonist's perception can be altered in that he or she sees or hears imaginary objects and may actually experience delusions.

"Delusions and hallucinations are given flesh - embodiment on the stage - and an equality of status with normal sensory perceptions"

Moreno (1946, p. a)

Or, the protagonist could intentionally use their imagination to "see" objects needed to put them into the scene, such as furniture or pictures from the living room of their childhood. Theatre actors train this facility to perfection. In fact, the legendary acting master teacher Sanford Meisner defines acting as "*living truthfully under imaginary circumstances*" (Meisner & Longwell, 1987, p. 15). This idea can also be found in Stanislavski's Method:

"An actor can make himself actually see anything on the stage - a vase, a picture, a book - by building around it some imaginary details which will make it attractive to him"

Moore (1960, p. 31)

Through their powers concentration actors might experience feeling cold, even though they are in a warm theatre. This point is not diminished by the fact that the actor might be aware that these perceptions are imaginary and he or she might not "really" believe it, as is also the case in psychedelic drug induced ASC.

During role-reversal protagonists can even take on someone else's perception, which facilitates empathy. "*When you truly role-reverse there is a shift of perception either during or after the process*" (Moreno, Blomkvist, & Rützel, 2000, p. 15). For example, by playing the role of their father, they may discover what keeps him from expressing his love. This can help them later to deal with their father.

"*I was able to work through some built up feelings about my dad. I really felt that I could say everything I had wanted to say to him for so long, as well as see things from his perspective which I felt I hadn't really been able to do before*".

Scheiffele & Kaye (2002, p. 28)

### 3. Imagery and Fantasy

The ability to imagine detailed fantasies is greatly enhanced on the stage. Experienced protagonists (or inexperienced protagonists under the guidance of the director) can create and immediately enact fantastic stories. The scenes evolve naturally, often without much thinking or planning. There is a "*sense of fantasy, absorption and imagination which is involved with creating drama*" (Pickering 1997, p. iv).

The reality of the stage can best be compared to the reality of dreams (which are recognised as an ASC). Anything is possible. Time is non-linear. Time and space can be changed at any moment. Animals and even furniture can speak. Fears as well as fantasies get acted out. Dead people can come to life. The past and the future can be experienced, as it happened, or should have happened, or will happen and with all kinds of modifications. This different reality is what Moreno called *surplus reality* (Fox 1987, p. 7-8) and it is "*one of the most vital, curative and mysterious elements of psychodrama*" (Moreno et al 2000, p. ix). The ability to enact fantasies is an essential part of psychodrama's potential to heal, as for example when "finishing unfinished business" with a dead person.

Dreams are sometimes the subject of psychodramas. Here the purpose is not to interpret the dream but to allow the dreamer to re-experience the dream on stage and to amplify the experience.

"The objective of psychodramatic techniques is to stir up the dreamer to produce the dream instead of analysing it for him"

Moreno in Fox (1987, p. 199)

In the enactment of dreams it is often most apparent that the actor is in an altered state. Working with dreams is one my special interests, and this may well have been where I first had the idea that psychodrama often appears like entering an altered state. After dream enactments, protagonists frequently declare that they felt as if they had been back in the dream. This of course implies that they experienced an ASC, as dreaming is one of the prime examples for ASC experience (Farthing 1992, p. 254-333). Emunah (1994), a dramatherapist, has also compared the functions of dreams and drama,

"I believe that Rossi's description of dreams as 'a laboratory for experimenting with change in our psychic life' applies to drama as well"

(Emunah 1994, p. xv)



#### 4. Inner Speech

When the protagonist is fully warmed-up and involved in a scene, there is less self-talk and less self-consciousness due to total absorption with the task at hand (this is at least the goal, beginners of course often become more self-conscious at first). During *role-reversal* it is even possible for the protagonist's inner speech to change into that of someone else, a very strong form of alteration. "*So the protagonist must really step outside the self and become the other person*" (Moreno et al 2000, p. 14). This is most familiar to character actors, for whom changing the 'inner monologue' to that of the character is one of the main techniques used to stay in character.

"This continuous thinking while another character speaks, or during pauses in your own lines, is called inner monologue. .... Images and inner monologue are essential steps toward building the character"

Moore (1979, p. 55f)

#### 5. Memory

Sometimes in psychodrama the protagonist remembers long forgotten events in especially vivid detail, including long forgotten sensory experiences. For example, they might remember the smells and sounds from the time when they first went to the dentist as a child. In role-reversal, the past can be remembered from someone else's viewpoint. When role-reversing with his mother who brought him to the dentist, the protagonist may remember the agony that she experienced in bringing her child to such a place. Previously he may not have been aware of his mother's feelings during this past event.

During psychodrama memory recall may appear to be improved, but as Farthing states for hypnosis, so too in psychodrama

"It is often difficult to distinguish between a delusion (false belief) of enhanced recall and true hypermnesia (better than normal memory)"

Farthing (1992, p. 209)

However, since ASCs are defined as subjective experiences, either of these possibilities would count as evidence for being in an ASC.

Farthing also includes, in this category, changes in the associations between words and images and truly creative combinations of ideas. This often occurs in psychodrama, where participants make creative connections between images and events. When enacting a dream, they

might discover the connection between animals in the dream and parts of their own self. For the purposes of the investigation of ASCs, it does not matter whether these connections are "correct" in some objective sense, more that they happen.

## 6. Higher-Level Thought Processes

Being in an ASC can enhance creativity and "*people sometimes come up with truly creative solutions to practical or artistic problems*" (Farthing 1992, p. 209). This is one of the reasons why some artists seek out this state of "inspiration", which they describe similar to other accounts of ASCs,

"Inspiration, experienced as an instantaneous flash, can be delightful and invigorating and can generate a lifetime of work. Giving birth to a line of poetry brings with it an incredible rush of energy, coherence and clarity, exaltation and exultation. In that moment, beauty is palpable, living. The body feels strong and light. The mind seems to float easily through the world."

Nachmanovitch (1990, p. 18)

Psychodrama, dramatherapy, and also other forms of improvisational theatre (e.g. Boal's Forum Theatre) can function as a "*rehearsal for life*" (Moreno in Fox, 1987, p. 5). The protagonist or the group can suddenly come up with a new solution to a problem. Boal (1992) describes his Forum Theatre as follows:

"The spect-actors, by acting out their ideas, train for 'real life' action; and actors and audience alike, by playing, learn the possible consequences of their actions. They learn the arsenal of the oppressors and the possible tactics and strategies of the oppressed"

Boal (1992, p. 20)

Educators, who use role-playing for problem solving, have also mentioned the advantages of using ASCs:

"Through its various production techniques, role playing utilizes altered states of consciousness to increase the chances of creative breakthroughs in conflict situations"

Torrance, Murdock, & Fletcher (1996, p. 58)

## 7. Meaning or Significance of Experiences:

Psychodrama often involves a feeling of being in tune (or experiencing what Moreno would call *Tele*), or being at one with other people and the environment. As in other ASCs, this "ineffable experience" of "oneness" (Farthing, 1992, p. 210) can be perceived as mysterious. Among the most uncanny parts of many psychodramas is the *Tele* displayed in the selection of auxiliary egos, who often turn out to be the "right" person, not only for the therapeutic process of the protagonist, but also for their own healing. The following instance described by Zerka Moreno is representative of this phenomenon:

In a group of psychodramatists consisting of forty-five participants a young woman protagonist needed to work on the sudden death of her father. He died in his sleep in bed lying next to his wife, her mother. This sudden event made it impossible for her to complete her farewell to him and she proceeded to do this in her psychodrama. She chose for her father a young man whom she knew because they worked in the same mental health clinic. It became clear during the sharing that they had never discussed this traumatic event in her life. So imagine the amazement of the protagonist as well as the rest of the group when the auxiliary ego told her that his own father had died in the very same way.

This phenomenon occurs very frequently in psychodrama, namely that an unknown event in the chosen auxiliary ego's life is brought to light specifically in the sharing. We are now beginning to accept this mysterious effect because we assume it is related to the *Tele* phenomenon.

Moreno et al (2000, p. 119-120)

In common with other "ineffable" ASC experiences, it is almost impossible to verbally communicate the experience of psychodrama. Most psychodramatists can relate to the problem of trying to explain to relatives and friends (or to potential employers!) just what it is that they are so excited about.

On stage the actors can be more real than in life. They are free to "*be on the stage what they are, more deeply and explicitly than they appear to be in life reality*" (Moreno 1946, p. c). Psychodrama does not merely imitate reality, but rather magnifies it, making it "bigger than life". Protagonists often remember their dramas for a long time and sometimes consider them to be cornerstones on their life's journey. Thus Farthing's comments about changes in the meaning or significance of experiences in ASCs clearly apply to psychodrama as well.

"A fairly common ASC experience involves the feeling that certain thoughts or events are profoundly important, perhaps of great creative or mystical significance"

Farthing (1992, p. 209-210)

Farthing continues:

"In contrast to the feelings of profundity that arise in some ASC experiences, the other side of the coin is that some ASC experiences seem to be exceptionally humorous. This is another case of changed meaning or significance of experience"

Farthing (1992, p. 210)

Spontaneous acting indeed often increases people's sense of humour and allows them to laugh at their foibles. This can be a healing experience in itself, one Moreno refers to as "*a catharsis coming from humour and laughter*" (Moreno in Fox 1987, p. 211). It can also be heard in the case of Barbara whereby much of the healing power of the enactments arose from her increased ability to laugh at herself (see Moreno in Fox, 1987, p. 211).

## 8. Time Experience

When immersed in psychodrama, time may seem to stand still due to the complete absorption in the moment. As in other ASCs, there is a "*non-linear experience of timelessness or eternal present*" (Farthing 1992, p. 211). It is possible for time to slow down and the subjective experience to be altered in such a way that there appears to be all the time needed to make complicated decisions or perform complex actions. On the other hand, from the narrative point of view, time often speeds up; as experienced in psychodramas that span an entire lifetime in two hours, frequently moving from the past to the future in minutes. As Zerka Moreno puts it:

"I have to forget about human time and open up or even take away the frontiers. In psychodrama you can weave from past to present to future and back again"

Moreno et al (2000, p. 8)

## 9. Emotional Feeling and Expression

One of the main features of psychodrama is indeed the heightened level of affect and expressiveness. Farthing's (1992) explanation for this subject again seems to apply to psychodrama: "*The overt expression of emotions, such as affectionate touching, crying, or violent actions, may be uninhibited in ASCs*" (Farthing 1992, p. 211). Reactions to people and events become more immediate and emotional. The "touchy/feely" atmosphere of psychodrama is frequently mentioned, either as a reason to like it or for others to dislike it.

High levels of affect can increase memory and the amount of learning that occurs. "*Emotionally arousing experiences are generally well remembered*" (McGaugh 2000, p. 248). Perhaps due to the fact that "*emotional experiences spark the release of adrenergic hormones, which strengthen memories of those events*" (Bower 1994). This is especially relevant when using role-playing as a "rehearsal for life". Since the players are more emotionally aroused and all of their senses are involved, behaviours that are role-played are more likely to be remembered compared to those that only talked about. This is one of the reasons for psychodrama's effectiveness in changing behaviour.

With a supportive audience and director, the stage can be a safe place to experiment. Actors can express themselves in new ways without suffering the consequences of real life. For example, they might yell at their parents in a psychodrama. In this way they can have the benefit of releasing unexpressed emotions, without suffering the consequences of hurting their parents (cf. Emunah 1994, p. xiv). Or they can try out different ways of relating to their parents, later choosing the one they are most comfortable with.

The freedom of expression on the stage can be liberating and cathartic and, not surprisingly, many are drawn to this quality of the experience.

Why a stage? It provides the patient with a living space which is multi-dimensional and flexible to the maximum. The living space of reality is often narrow and restraining, he may easily lose his equilibrium. On the stage he may find it again due to its methodology of freedom - freedom from unbearable stress and freedom for experience and expression.

Moreno (1946, p. a)

## 10. Level of Arousal

Action methods often involve a higher than normal state of arousal, including physiological signs such as increased heart rate and breathing. Many actors love the experience of acting because it is exciting. At the very least they can experience an adrenaline rush due to the fact that they are in front of an audience. In catharsis arousal can sometimes reach a climax of emotional expression and afterwards subside to a deeply relaxed state, for example during and after sobbing.

"After three hours of Moreno's method two sobbing policemen were surrounded by compassionate hippies confiding personal memories of their own to the co-protagonists"

Sacks (1994, p. 2)

## 11. Self-control

Spontaneous acting is often experienced as a state in which actions *just* happen. Actors find themselves surprised by their own actions or words. Many find this experience highly desirable - it is the opposite of boredom and predictability. In improvisational acting they try to "get out of their heads" and learn to trust their impulses. Meisner (1987) calls upon the actor to "*accept whatever comes out spontaneously!*" (Meisner & Longwell 1987, p.173). This experience of immediacy is shared by many different ASCs and is also a goal in some mystical traditions, such as Zen Buddhism or Taoism. "*In some ASCs people's normally voluntary responses may seem to happen automatically, without a sense of volition*" (Farthing 1992, p. 211).

When Farthing describes people during ASCs as "*doing things that go against their usual social inhibitions*" (Farthing 1992, p. 211), it becomes clear that the same applies to actors, whether in psychodrama or theatre.

"They [protagonists during role-reversal] step outside themselves and enact sides of themselves they would never allow to be shown otherwise"

Moreno et al (2000, p. 14).

Meisner (1987) echoes Moreno when he encourages this:

"You're allowed to do things onstage that you don't do in life. You're permitted to express yourself on stage and don't need to hold yourself back as you must in life"

Meisner & Longwell (1987, p. 162)

## 12. Suggestibility

Farthing writes that

"Suggestibility has to do with responsiveness to suggestions. In general terms, a *suggestion* is a communication from one person to another that induces the second person to change his/her behaviour or beliefs, without any argument or coercion being involved"

Farthing (1992, p. 211)

He mentions hypnosis as a prime example of a state of consciousness, in which asking a person to vividly imagine some state of affairs leads to an acceptance of the imagination as reality, such that the person's behaviour (and physiology) will change in a manner consistent with the suggestion. This is illustrated with the following example:

"A hypnotised subject might be told that flies are swarming around his face and crawling on his skin. In response to the suggestion he might hallucinate the buzzing and the feeling of flies on the skin, and make overt responses of grimacing and brushing the flies away"

Farthing (1992, p. 212)

The same suggestion and response could occur in psychodrama or improvisational drama. One of the skills learned in improvisational acting is the ability to immediately follow the suggestions of other players. When someone tells you that there are flies on your skin, you immediately accept the offer as reality and respond accordingly. For skilled actors, this experience can be very real.

The ability to make the experience real for the actor is at the core of why using *surplus reality* in psychodrama works (cf. Moreno, et al., 2000; Kipper 2000). When protagonists enact the nurturing childhood they wish they had and make it real with scene setting and other tools, this experience becomes part of who they are, and can indeed nurture and heal them. They can move towards becoming a person who has had a nurturing childhood. Theatre actors appreciate how the scenes in which they act become memorable parts of their lives. Thus they often immediately understand this aspect of psychodrama, whereas mental health professionals and long-time patients often respond: "*There is no point in enacting something that never has and never will happen.*"

Despite these benefits, the topic of suggestibility highlights one of the greatest dangers of entering ASCs; which is that no matter how subtle or unconscious the protagonist is likely to follow any suggestion the director might make. Thus, during psychodrama, leading questions should be

avoided especially around the controversial issue of child abuse. So, for example, instead of asking "*What did he do to you now?*" it is preferable to simply ask, "*What happened next?*"

This good ethical practice in questioning is corroborated by a number of studies that have indicated that when children's reports are spontaneous, or in response to open-ended questions (e.g., "*Tell me what happened?*"), their reports are more accurate than those prompted by specific questions. (Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 1998, p. 144)

### **13. Body Image**

Psychodrama frequently induces a sense of unity between body, mind and feelings, all of which are active on stage. When actors play someone else (or themselves as children), they can change their body image to that of another person. They are able to walk and move, for example sensing their body as much lighter than its actual weight. This can happen in both character acting (especially when using Michael Chekhov's technique, cf. Chekhov, 1991) and during psychodrama in role-reversal. Here described by Zerka Moreno,

"But perception in the role of the other brings one very close to the essence of that other and sometimes includes feelings in the body and changes in size"

Moreno et al (2000, p. 16)

In particular, auxiliaries in the role of *double* are often instructed first to take on the exact body position and tension of the protagonist, as a way to enter the role through the body.

One other aspect connected to body image, and as in other ASCs, "*sensitivity to pain might decrease*" (Farthing, 1992, p. 212). This is due to the complete absorption involved. If a protagonist gets hurt on stage, she or he might not feel the pain until later.



## 14. Sense of Personal Identity

People's perception of who they can be can be changed and expanded through the enacting of a variety of roles. Dramatherapists use this process therapeutically.

"Drama is a vehicle not only for experiencing and integrating new aspects of ourselves, but also for expressing suppressed shadow aspects of ourselves"

Emunah (1994, p. xv)

Actors in theatre and psychodrama find it liberating to discover that they can choose to be different. They can enact characters completely unlike themselves. For example, in the case of Barbara reported by Moreno, her breakthrough comes after she enacts the role of a streetwalker. "*Suddenly Barbara changed to a manner of acting totally unexpected from her*" (Moreno 1946, p. 4). Farthing (1992) also mentions this freeing effect of some ASCs. "*Sometimes a change in perceived personal identity is a positive experience, as when people feel rejuvenated or reborn*" (Farthing 1992, p. 212).

The actors' sense of personal identity can also be altered in such a way that they feel as if someone else is acting through them, another person or god, depending on their spiritual beliefs. They might lose their sense of personal identity and feel they are "channelling" someone else. They can experience such a sense of unity that they no longer feel separate from anyone or anything else.

As alluded to above, in role-reversal the actors change their personal identity to that of someone else. Sometimes they get so absorbed in a role that it is difficult to come back. Directors should be aware of this and use *de-roling*, which Zerka Moreno describes as follows:

"Sometimes I suggest to an auxiliary or a double, 'Do you need to get free of the role? Move about, shake, and get rid of the role any way you need to.' One can really take over other people's ills this way if one is sensitive or especially vulnerable and does not know how to protect the self. We do that with any troubling role and call it 'de-roling'".

Moreno et al (2000, p. 71)

## ***Conclusions***

In psychodrama the subjective experience of most of the 14 dimensions is frequently altered and it is this that constitutes an ASC experience. As in all ASCs, the intensity of the alterations varies between different experiences and some people are more readily prone to enter an ASC than others. Dramatherapists also use the power of acting to expand consciousness.

"At the heart of drama therapy is the experience of liberation, expansion, and perspective. The essence of drama therapy is uncovering and integrating dormant aspects of ourselves, enlarging our conception of who we are, and finding our intrinsic connection with others".

Emunah (1994, p. 302)

## Implications: Precautions

Psychodramatists, dramatherapists, experiential therapists and educators need to be attentive to the fact that clients might enter an altered state during role-play. And those ASC experiences are associated with dangers and benefits. Students, especially those at the beginning of their training, whether psychodrama or acting, might need help, not only in entering an ASC, but also in getting out of it. Though in most cases all that is needed is time, there are other precautions that can be recommended. For example, that protagonists do not drive a car for at least 30 minutes after a drama, or that they do not make any irreversible decisions, such as breaking up with a lover, until some days after the enactment.

Psychodrama directors need to be acutely aware of the fact that protagonists might enter a trance-like hypnotic state, in which they are susceptible to suggestions. As in hypnosis, the director must be careful not to impose their own feelings or opinions on the subject, or to elicit false memories or other projections. Sometimes the protagonist needs to be protected from doubles and other auxiliaries trying to impress their views. This has, of course, always been the way psychodrama *should* be done and here is just one more reason. As Zerka Moreno puts it: "*When I direct a session I am a blank slate, a blank screen. Most of the time I do not have any preconceived notions*" (Moreno et al, 2000, p. 55).

Recently there has been much talk about the *false memory syndrome*, and now memories recovered under hypnosis are no longer allowed as legal evidence in court (Gibson, 1995; McConkey, 1995). Since psychodrama by definition deals with the subjective world, when a protagonist remembers traumatic childhood experiences the issue of historical accuracy is not so relevant. Personally, another precaution is to warn the protagonist that some times recovered memories can be less than accurate. So for example if they are considering a lawsuit against their parents they might search for additional evidence. Importantly and realistically, I hope this disclaimer will keep the client from suing the therapist.

Therapists working with children need to be even more careful about the way in which they conduct interviews; indeed, interviews are a part of most psychodramas. Studies that involve comparisons between age groups "*overwhelmingly show that pre-schoolers are the most suggestible group*" (Bruck et al 1998, p.146). The same article mentions that girls are more likely than boys to over-report touching of private

parts (this is done in videotaped events, so that there is objective information about what occurred). It concludes by saying,

“To summarise, a variety of interviewing techniques can result in young children making false allegations about a wide range of events. Sometimes these false reports involve their own bodies, and sometimes these reports involve false accusations about non-existent crimes”.

(Bruck et al (1998, p. 143)

Bruck et al mention several suggestive interviewing techniques that have been shown to increase reports of false events in children (and to a lesser extent in adults). “These techniques included the use of peer pressure (‘Megan and Shonda were there and they told me you were there, too’), visualisation techniques (‘Try to think about what might have happened’), repeating (mis)information, and providing selective reinforcement” (p. 143)

The visualisation techniques in particular are similar to what often occurs in psychodrama, except that instead of internal visualisation, psychodramatists use role-playing to enact the visualised event. Research needs to be done to show whether role-playing increases the risk of false memories, as compared to visualisations. This appears likely, as role-playing creates an experience not only in our imagination, but in our body, and hence seems more real. When using Surplus Reality for healing (and not for finding historical facts), it is of course desirable for the protagonist to believe and act as *if* the psychodramatically improved version of events had actually happened. So it is important to distinguish therapeutic considerations from legal fact finding. It would be interesting to conduct more research on how memory is affected through role-playing in general and psychodrama in particular.

During the 2000 ASGPP conference in New York, I conducted a conversation hour on the topic of this paper. According to their subjective experience most of the participants shared that they had entered ASCs during psychodrama. They agreed that as protagonists they are very susceptible to suggestions, and one participant added that one has to be aware that such suggestions or projections can also come from the double, since protagonists are likely to go along with a double. It is ultimately the director's responsibility to be careful in this regard and to check with the protagonist whether the double's suggestions are accurate. For this reason, I often say to the protagonist after a double's remark: *"If this feels right for you, repeat it in your own words; if it does*

*not feel right, correct it."* Even with this caution, it may happen that protagonists go along with suggestions that are not truthful to their own experience.

### **Implications: Benefits**

Despite these cautions, there are also many benefits to entering ASCs, as Farthing acknowledges:

For people who experience them, ASCs may be important for three reasons: (1) to promote healing and psychological well-being; (2) as avenues of new knowledge and experience, such as personal insight and artistic inspiration; and (3) to serve social functions, such as religious rituals and promoting group cohesion.

Farthing (1992, p. 218)

Farthing's list is quite comprehensive and identifies many of the reasons given by people who promote psychodrama (e.g. Emunah, 1994; Moreno, et al., 2000), thus giving further evidence for the link between action methods and ASCs.

Whether one believes entering ASCs is beneficial or not, the fact remains that to enter ASCs is a universal human desire, attempted by many people in all cultures throughout history. Especially in American culture this is often attempted through harmful means, such as using drugs (legal or illegal) or committing violence.

James Gilligan, a Harvard psychiatrist, in his insightful study of the causes of violence, points out that murderers throughout history and throughout the world consistently report feeling dead. "*When they say they feel dead they mean they cannot feel anything - neither emotions nor even physical sensations*" (Gilligan, 1996, p. 33). Murder and inflicting pain on themselves and others is for them a (misguided) attempt to alter their consciousness in order to feel more alive. "*Some have told me they feel like robots or zombies*" (Gilligan, 1996, p. 33).

If psychodrama and sociodrama help people to reach ASCs and fulfill this desire in a safe manner, this in itself could be seen as a means to prevent violence and drug abuse. Then it would be imperative to promote healthy activities that heighten spontaneity and vitality, such as role-playing, improvisation, and psychodrama. The ASC experiences in psychodrama echo much of what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described as *flow* (1997). And he seems to be in agreement with our conclusion:

“When a person finds few meaningful opportunities for action in the environment, he or she will often resort to finding flow in activities that are destructive, addictive, or at the very least wasteful”

Csikszentmihalyi (1999, p. 826)

Further studies need to be done to establish more clearly these connections. Especially the availability of empirical studies about the benefits of psychodrama will be of great importance in advocating why there is a need for active experiences, in this society dominated by passive television.

Proponents of physical exercise have been very successful, as it is now seen as beneficial to most people throughout their lives and not merely a way to train professional athletes. In the same way psychodrama must be promoted as a healthy experience for everyone, and not just for professional actors, nor only for people labelled with psychiatric disorders. This is of course also how Moreno saw it: "*A truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind*" (Moreno, 1953, p. 3).

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### ***About the author***

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