

## A Personal Reflection:

### Psychodrama Training as a Method of Deepening the Actor's Craft

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The article is a personal memoir of an acting student's journey into the techniques of acting through the use of traditional methods and those derived from the healing arts. The author attributes a sensitivity and depth of the actor to empathy training. The experience of acting in a psychodrama is further emphasized as an effective means to developing an actor's craft. Finally, the actor's purpose in a theatrical production is compared with the actor's purpose in psychodrama and drama therapy.

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I squeezed my eyes shut, almost in a trancelike state, lulled by my teacher's voice. "Imagine your character is right there, looking in your eyes. As you look back into her eyes, you hear her say something, a secret. What does she tell you? She takes your hand and brings you through a day in her life." I leaned back in the rickety wooden seat as sunlight poked through the slats in the roof, casting a holy hue on our acting class. The Rachel Corday Actor's Studio was my refuge from the stark facts and fluorescent lights of the PhD program I was attending in clinical psychology. I had always loved acting, but this was different. I was mesmerized by the depths that we plunged in that class. Since it was touted as a beginner's-level class, there was little to no focus on technique—motivation, breaking lines down into beats, subtext. Rachel focused almost exclusively on authenticity of emotion and empathy for characters other than ourselves. When I finally had a monologue or two in my hand—the Peter Pan monologue from *'Dentify Crisis* and Katherine's monologue from *Journey to the Day*—the authenticity of the situations and the emotions just spewed from me. It all felt so real! When I left Colorado and Rachel's acting class, I started getting callbacks and I felt I had left a mark in the room, whether or not I got the role. I carried Rachel's gifts with me.

Almost two years ago, I entered the Alternative Training Track in drama therapy, and this year I have experienced the magic of Nina Garcia's psychodrama

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trainings. Last month, Nina and I e-mailed back and forth about what it is like acting as an auxiliary in a psychodrama, and how it differs from acting in a play. There is something so immediate, we agreed, about having the character whose life you are portraying standing right there before you that opens up a deeper channel than reading lines in a script. Nina shared how many acting graduate students who take a graduate psychodrama class seem to leave the class as stronger actors. While her comments made intellectual sense to me, it was when my mind drifted back to years before, to the sanctity of Rachel's acting class, that I truly grasped the meaning of Nina's comments. Why did Rachel's class open up channels so very much like acting as an auxiliary in a psychodrama? Why was that class in Colorado so palpable, like the experience I had attending Nina's psychodrama trainings; what was the connection? I Googled my old teacher—was she still alive? The words on the screen spelled out the sad reality. Rachel had passed away 4 years ago.

Rachel Corday, the obituary read, had a doctorate in expressive arts therapy. I had fallen deeply in love with acting through the Corday Actor's Studio because acting had been taught through the eyes of a creative-arts therapist who used drama as a modality for healing. Rachel had taught us to connect with characters in plays the way a psychodramatist guides clients to step into the shoes of the auxiliary world of the protagonist. The characters we played became as sacred and dear to us as the protagonist who stands before us, trusting us as they shed their masks and share their authentic, vulnerable selves with us.

When I left Colorado and Rachel's acting studio, I went on to study acting with numerous teachers in New York City and Los Angeles and eventually in an MFA program at Sarah Lawrence. There were many moments when I felt disconnected from Rachel's teachings. In those times, when I could not create the feeling of pure empathy like my character was standing right there in front of me so I could step into her shoes, I had many techniques I could fall back on. I decoded scripts and analyzed the intentions of the playwright. I used physical exercises and explored the physicality of my characters. I brought all the work I had done on Shakespeare and classical texts, to use the language as a springboard for character and emotion. I used meditation and sense memory. And I used Meisner techniques to help me play off the energy of my scene partners. Often the emotions and characters would truly spring to life, but after much hard work. The most authentic moments, not surprisingly, seemed to be the moments of improvisation and spontaneity, the same principles we look for in a psychodrama.

Two years ago, when I began taking classes in drama therapy, I stepped into the office of Brooke Campbell, my Board Certified Trainer, and took a workshop in Playback Theater. I had not acted professionally in several years. I figured I must be rusty. Another student in the workshop told her story, and I was chosen to enact the main role. A huge fear overcame me; a huge sense of responsibility. I was not asked to simply create a fictional person off the page of a script, from a writer's imagination—I was asked to enact a real-life person, sitting before me, who needed this moment and needed me to represent her and let her know she had been heard and listened to on all levels. And, as in Rachel's class years ago, I became that person to such an extent it startled both the teller and myself. I did not need a motivation and a full character analysis. I needed concern, empathy,

and compassion, and I became her. When we reached the psychodrama component of my course on the principles of psychodrama, the same thing happened. I was asked to play auxiliaries, and I was asked to double as the protagonist. I could hear the need in the protagonist's voice and see it in her eyes, asking me, begging me, to fulfill her hunger for healing. The emotions, the need, the character, just seemed to enter me, as if a channel opened up, filling me with knowledge of this other person's life. This was an occurrence which rarely happened so automatically in a typical acting class.

With more experience in psychodrama under my belt, through Nina's trainings, I now see the full effect of the process. We start with the warm-up, allowing us to open up to the spontaneity of experience and move on to hearing the stories of the possible protagonists, allowing the tellings to reverberate with our psyches. As the protagonist is chosen, and the director walks them around the room unraveling their story until the necessary scene is decided upon, all acting technique can be summarized in those moments. We have need, motivation, background, subtext. After we are chosen to play an auxiliary role, we are quickly taught the role and somehow we step up to the plate and take on the vital characteristics. But most importantly, we have a purpose. We are needed in this healing story.

As a professional actor becomes more seasoned and friends and family come less frequently to our numerous performances, we often rely on the audience to be our purpose; the reason we are performing the role is to affect the audience—to make them laugh, cry, have an epiphany, or at least have some kind of catharsis. But all too many times, we leave the stage feeling stale or stagnant. We hear the polite applause, but we have no idea where our performance is landing or if it is landing anywhere at all. And this, in and of itself, can sometimes make acting feel empty. We all need to know we have a purpose.

When acting in a psychodrama, when your audience is a client—a person who wants and needs to be there, who needs to take part in this enactment and deeply grow from it—it is common to leave feeling brimming with meaning. There is little of the self-doubt actors often feel in acting classes. Did I hit the mark; did I succeed in being believable? The protagonist has entrusted you with a secret, a glimpse into the auxiliary egos as represented in their psyche, like real-life characters from a playwright's imagination. As we bring that world to life, the protagonist recognizes that we have genuinely listened, that their inner world is worthy of enactment. Through the gratitude in the protagonist's eyes, or the lightness in their shoulders, the actor knows that their own personal work has truly been of value.