

Baakman, P (1997) Purposes of Scene-Setting in Psychodrama, abridged extract from *Setting the Scene*, Psychodrama Thesis.

*This is an abridged extract from thesis: 'SETTING THE SCENE', by Paul Baakman. The complete thesis is available upon request in any of the following formats: -photocopy (\$10.-), on floppy disc (5.-) Mail request to: 79 Bealey Avenue, CH.CH.-N.Z.*

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## **PURPOSES OF SCENE-SETTING IN PSYCHODRAMA:**

### **1. WARM-UP / WARM DOWN PURPOSES**

Normally, a protagonist's warm-up deepens as the drama progresses. There are circumstances in which the warm-up needs to be either further stimulated or brought down, (akin to the accelerator and brakes in a car). Knowing about this will assist the director in creating an environment in which group members feel safe enough to allow an appropriate level of warm-up.

a. Thorough attention to scene setting provides the audience, the director, and the protagonist with an increasing warm-up. A movie or a book often starts with the setting of a scene and the introduction of the characters, and warms the reader up to what is to follow. The same counts for psychodrama.

"As a result of the picturing or visualisation of the scene, the physical activity in placing the chairs, the dialogue with the director, and further looking at the objects as they have been placed, the protagonist warms up more." (Max Clayton, 'Enhancing life and Relationships', p.75).

b. The element of surprise in a quick succession of scenes can lead to an increasing warm-up. This can be helpful with a protagonist who tends to intellectualise.

c. With a protagonist who is highly anxious it can be helpful to stay with one scene, and explore this one scene briefly but thoroughly (this is called a "vignette").

d. With overly warmed-up or hysterical protagonists, thorough scene setting may also assist in a warming down process. This enables them to have their cognitive functions present, instead of being overwhelmed and guided purely by their emotions. (also see below: 'safety purposes').

e. The director's creativity and thoughtfulness in setting up the room prior to a group session has an impact on what is to follow. A circular seating arrangement, for instance, is likely to warm a group up to talking and closure, whereas a semi-circle, or horse-shoe seating arrangement with a defined action space, leads to an expectation of action, (see diagram in 'fundamental concepts of scene setting in psychodrama'). The placing of two chairs, one for director and one for the protagonist, creates an intrigue (this is an aspect of the directors' role of Magician)

f. The use of upright chairs warms up to structure and action, whereas the use of cushions warms up to informality, physical closeness or passivity, (depending on other factors).

g. The self-care evident in the director's self-presentation produce the first communications at the start of a session, and can be seen as an element in the here-

and-now scene-setting every director does when starting off. This can have a defining influence on the warm up of group members. In the training of fashion models it is widely accepted that an audience will make up their mind about the model during the first 10 - 15 seconds. A group too, will conclude much about who the director is , and what to expect in the first 10 - 15 seconds of a session.

h. The director who plans a particular warm-up, can use different scenes for this. Examples of this are: a crib scene, a deathbed scene, a scene based on old family photographs, or 'magic shop'. These are all examples of a 'director-directed warm-up', (in a 'group-directed warm-up' the director will work with the group process in order to develop a focus for action).

i. With a protagonist who has a negative warm-up to scene-setting, creativity with regards to what constitutes scene setting is called for.

## **2. SAFETY PURPOSES**

Psychodrama can be a powerful method, which has a great impact on people. Therefore it is important to maintain safety. Conscious use of scene setting can play an important part in this process.

a. Scene setting provides a structure. The presence of a structure promotes the experience of safety for all present. A protagonist is less likely to feel they are acting in mid-air. This is of particular importance during the beginning stages of a group or with an overly self-conscious protagonist.

b. As in sport attention to warm-up prior to exertion helps prevent injuries, so in psychodrama a gradually deepening warm-up assist a client in learning to swim, rather than being thrown in the deep end.

c. By sharing experiences through scene setting, a protagonist can break through isolation and gain hope.

d. Playing out situations to their logical conclusions interferes with tendencies toward denial. Risk-taking can be tried out in a safe context. The impact of behaviour can be judged from someone else's point of view.

e. Scene setting can be used as an alternative to control through drug-therapy. In his book 'Toxic Psychiatry', (p.199 - 211), which attacks the "deception, half-truths and lies of psychiatry", Peter Breggin MD describes the dangers attached to 'wonder drugs' like Prozac.

It seems to me that much of the contemporary mental health scene is dominated by a belief in drugs, as long as it is called 'medicine'. There are, of course, circumstances in which drugs provide necessary relief from great suffering. The advantages of scene setting are that it does not cause dependency, does not damage organs, does not cloud consciousness or suppress feelings, and in many cases can be, I believe, a safer and more effective alternative.

f. With a protagonist who is in danger of acting out in destructive ways, thoughtful scene setting may have a preventive effect, rather than it being a 'rehearsal for life'. Consider the drama in which a protagonist wishes to act out a vengeful murder. The inclusion of a police officer, a court, a judge and a jail may wake the protagonist up to the long-term consequences of such an act rather than the short-lived gratification of violence.

## **3. DIAGNOSTIC/ASSESSMENT PURPOSES**

A scene provides the context in which roles are enacted. Roles give expression to the

Self.

A number of roles may appear in a cluster around a central role. A person in a particular role may evoke counter-roles in others, and so role-systems emerge. These role-systems can be self-maintaining through the nature of the interaction between roles.

- a. The characteristics of the scene that is set indicate the kind of role-systems that are likely to be encountered in the ensuing drama.
- b. The elements in the scene provide clues about which roles are underdeveloped, overdeveloped, conflicted, absent or adequate, and as such indicate strengths and weaknesses in the protagonist's role-repertoire.
- c. How a protagonist goes about setting the scene also indicates the presence of particular roles. Is the protagonist meticulous, even obsessive, about detail or are they going about with a slaphappy, she'll be right attitude? Do they act as if in a dentist's chair or are they enjoying the process of creating the scene
- d. The level of spontaneity and creativity in the use of objects and people are an indication of the strengths of the Protagonist.
- e. The ability to take on the roles of the different objects and people in the scene is an empathic ability. Each role consists of a different set of thoughts, feelings and actions. The director assists the protagonist in their warm-up by interviewing for a role. One of the director's roles used for this is the Naive Enquirer. The protagonist's ability to take on a variety of roles, especially roles outside their usual repertoire indicates the level of role-flexibility. This ability is an indicator of mental health.
- f. Role-playing and role-reversal can take place only when there first is a secure sense of self. A person labouring under psychosis will find it impossible to reverse roles, and may feel threatened when pressured to do so. Role reversal requires that one, temporarily, abandons one's usual sense of self. This is possible only when there is the security of knowing that there is defined 'self' to return to. A protagonist pressured into role reversal may in practice end up not knowing whether they are 'Arthur or Martha'. A director who is faced with a protagonist who cannot reverse roles will use this knowledge in making an assessment.

#### 4. THERAPEUTIC PURPOSES

All of human culture is expressed through a 'scene' in one form or another. All sociodynamic processes take place within a scene. Without a scene neither an individual nor a group has a way of expressing culture or conserving cultural values. Without a scene as a vehicle for expression, the whole idea of 'culture' becomes futile.

All experiences, including those that generate trauma, take place within the context of a scene. In order for healing to be a real life-experience, it makes sense to have this experience embedded in a scene, so the experience may be anchored to a time and place as well as people.

- a. Descriptions of experiences from people surviving concentration camps have alluded to the fact that those who were good at surviving were those who were good at holding on to mental images of loved ones to whom they hoped to return. Creative visualisation can be seen as a form of (mental) scene setting.
- b. In scenes in which there appears to be only misery, agony and desperation, it can

be of value for the director to get an idea of what kind of addition to the scene would be of comfort or inspiration to the protagonist. For instance, in the case of a protagonist in a childhood scene bereft of all that is good, this could mean the inclusion of a favourite toy, teddy bear or pet. Perhaps there is something in the scene already present, which if maximised, could provide a similar function.

c. With a protagonist with whom awareness and wisdom seem lacking, the inclusion of certain objects or people may, later on in the drama, provide the protagonist with a quiet point from which to reflect, (e.g. Grandfather Clock). These are simple but potentially effective therapeutic moves.

d. With a protagonist characterised by isolation or dominated by despair the director may early on include a double in the scene. 'A burden shared is a burden halved' goes the saying, and a double can make the difference between alienating terror, and shared grief.

Trish Reynolds gives an account of a psychodramatic approach in the management of Dissociative Identity Disorder, in the ANZPA Journal, (no.5, Dec. 1996, p.43-61).

e. Whilst setting out a scene the protagonist is already in the role of the Creative Artist. Creation of an atmosphere in which this is enjoyed and valued has an affirming and enabling effect.

f. When the drama requires of the protagonist to warm up to more functional roles, there often is already something present in the scene that can aid that warm up. Imagine a scene taking place in which an encounter between an embittered, closed off protagonist with a well meaning relative that is about to die. The drama may appear to be stuck. Entering into the life of the painting on the wall, depicting a wedding party, and fully reversing roles with the persons at the party, roles characterised by generosity, mutuality, enjoyment and humour are mobilised, and brought into the scene with the dying relative. In NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) this is used as a technique, in a process of visualisation and anchoring. The strength of scene setting is that it involves all of the senses. The protagonist does not only imagine or remember a scene, but through enactment is enabled to enter the experience of an event.

g. The concrete nature of setting a scene counters denial, depersonalisation and distortions in perception, and as such assist in reality testing.

h. 'Psychodrama`a Deux' ('with two') assumes a client-therapist situation where the therapist applies psychodrama techniques to the situation. Scene setting is often applied by psychodrama-trained psychotherapists, and has advantages over a verbal-analytic approach. One advantage is that it enlivens the consultation process (for both therapist and client), and this engenders hope.

## 5. AESTHETIC PURPOSES

Setting a scene is in itself a creative endeavour. Appreciation of this creativity can lead those involved to a greater joy of life, and will add to the view that: all of life is a work of art, and as such, is worthy of respect.

a. A crisp and thorough scene setting will lead to a greater audience involvement and enjoyment. It gives the protagonist the opportunity to employ their Creative Artist right at the start of the action phase. Much can be made of the simplest things. A single object can be displayed in a wooden or robotic manner, but can also be brought to life and be given meaning by concretising and maximising the subtle nuances of its essence.

**b.** The aesthetic qualities of a scene determine its artistic value. The beauty or poignancy of a display aids the involvement and enjoyment of everyone. Auxiliaries with flair have a chance to bring their ingenuity and sensitivity to the embodiment of a role or object.

**c.** Music, sound effects and lights can be used to enhance the particular quality of a scene.

During the last few years Natalia Artemiev, in the role of musician, has joined Robert Crawford on his workshops in Hanmer Springs, N.Z. They report that the inclusion of well-timed sounds and music enhances the warm-up of the protagonist as well as the group, and intensifies the aesthetic appeal of an enactment.