



Luigi Dotti

Public Psychodrama: A Link Between Personal and Social

I invite man to turn to himself. I invite him to recognize the meaning of the living encounter: in the age of computers, robots, household appliances, cars, and airplanes, I propose to him to establish an unmediated relationship with the people he meets in the streets, at work and at home, to acknowledge that their worthiness is immortal and unperishable and they are not mere numbers in a game.

(J. L. Moreno, New York, 1960s)

The quote by Moreno is an invitation to participate to an open session at the New York psychodrama theatre in the sixties.

I started with these vaguely prophetic words, because they express the profound meaning the creator of psychodrama wanted to give to the many public experiences that have accompanied his whole human and professional path: the invitation to an authentic and mutual encounter between human beings.

What is psychodrama?

Psychodrama (from the Greek *psiché* = soul, vital breath and *drama* = action) indicates a professional method that allows to know and explore the psychic reality and the relationships through the action, the theatre and the group.

What is public psychodrama?

Public psychodrama is "a group work with people who meet to share some personal experiences" (Bustos, 1995).

It should be added that this is a group work carried out with psychodramatic method (action and theatrical scene) and open to the public, in the sense that it provides for the free participation of people.

This report aims to provide a picture of psychodrama as a public, theatrical and social event. These consideration has been particularly supported by an almost twenty-year public psychodrama experience: "Le relazioni sulla scena" festival, still ongoing at the psychodrama theatre in Provaglio d'Iseo, Italy.

"Le relazioni sulla scena" (relationships on the scene): public psychodrama

Every time I cross the threshold into our theatre, I always think of the arch that is on the entrance road of the Republic of San Marino, on which is written: "Welcome to the land of freedom". I believe there is no other place more free than our theatre; you can access it for free, without any obligation of registration, booking, you can participate at any level, you can tell about yourself with the percentage of truth you want ... And to think that four years ago I entered for the first time to please a friend. (Giacomo, public psychodrama participant)

The theatre was created in 2001 as a space open to the population and as an opportunity to meet on issues and situations that relate to the concrete relationships of people, their daily lives.

Its aim is to build, through the psychodramatic method, a periodic reference to look at some relevant aspects of social life (care, family, old age, addictions, love, children, etc.). The meetings proposed by the psychodrama theatre try to focus on the group and the individual, on the socio-cultural aspects and the personal experience, on thought and action, on mind and body, on verbal and non-verbal.

The Vienna spontaneity theatre, created by Moreno in the twenties, had 49 seats. In honour of this pioneering experience, Provaglio d'Iseo psychodrama theatre has 49 chairs for the audience. (Fun fact: the chairs were initially 50, but one broke almost immediately: they had to be 49!).

The public psychodrama sessions are psychosocial and socio-cultural activities and are carried out under the patronage of the municipal administration. Participation is free. You can take part in single events as well as in the whole festival. Booking is not required. Two elements are important: the emphasis on freedom and the possibility to decide at the last minute without too many constraints.

The festival takes place from September to June, one event per month. Each edition has a container title (e.g. *"the Words of the Italian Constitution"*, *"Changes... Transformations... Variations..."*), and each event has an incentive title. Here are some titles: *"The Cure"*, *"The Crisis"*, *"Listen to me"*, *"Skin"*, *"Friends"*, *"Masters"*; *"Envy and Jealousy"*, *"Gratitude"*, *"Addictions"*, *"Gender Violence"*.

From 2001 to 2018, over 180 public psychodrama events took place.

How taking part in public psychodrama?

- Theatrical event, theatre of spontaneity on stories of ordinary people;
- opportunity for personal and relational growth;
- informational and training opportunity for education and health professionals (psychologists, health, social and educational workers) and for care workers.

This means people can take part in a single event just for curiosity, to make a new experience, for professional knowledge of psychodrama, sometimes for therapeutic needs and more: **the event is aimed at ordinary people**, not only to human relationship or care professionals.

"Le relazioni sulla scena" festival brings psychodrama to the stage, returning to the roots of this method, enhancing its social and community origin.

The path of public psychodrama is constantly aimed at meeting others and at dialogue between personal and social dimensions. The meeting with the social sphere is mediated by the encounter with real life stories, emotions, body and scene and it leaves ideological issues, rational verbalising and moralistic judgments in the background.

The path from personal to social (and vice versa) crosses the whole public psychodrama and happens in consecutive steps.

Step 1. Warm-up

"I notice others and others become aware of me!" People sit in a circle; if there are many people, all the space is occupied, including the stage, putting the chairs against the walls, but avoiding the double row, so that **people can see one another in the face**.

- A brief introduction is made on the meaning of the meeting and on psychodrama in general.
- A **brief self-presentation** of each participant follows.
- Active experience: people are invited to get up and walk in the theatre, **the gaze is valued as recognition of the people in the group; action sociometry** is proposed.

Step 2. Couples

- **The story is told in an intersubjective meeting.**
- **The others, representatives of the social world, listen and do not judge.**
- Couples are formed, inviting participants to choose the unknown or less known people.
- It is proposed to share experiences or personal stories related to the topic, with intersubjective modality (invitation to listen to the story of the partner without interrupting, asking questions or expressing evaluations).

Step 3. Presentation of the stories with role reversal: first social transformation of personal stories.

Identification of possible protagonists.

Usually, the director asks: "Who was impressed by the story of his partner?", and after a few hands got up: "Ask your partner if he agrees that his story can also be communicated to us. If so, raise your hand again".

All the possible protagonists get on the stage along with their partners and seat on a chair, lining up in front of the audience. All the partners stand behind each chair, keeping a physical contact with the sitting person (hands on shoulders).

Reverse role presentation

Standing people are invited to make a role reversal with their sitting partners and briefly tell their stories. At the end of each story, if deemed necessary, the sitting person makes additions and gives a title, possibly with suggestions from the public.

This presentation takes place in a ritual context (illuminated scene and darkened audience) and is the first activity characterized by theatricalization; the theatrical frame is also indicated by the fact that after each story, an applause by the audience starts spontaneously.

Step 4. Sociometric choice: a story is elected as significant by the group, representative of the social world.

The sociometric choice of the protagonist is made by the audience: people in the audience get up and place themselves in front of the narrator whose story has struck them most.

The person with the longest row of people will be the protagonist.

Step 5. The representation of the story

The protagonist remains alone with the director of psychodrama on the stage, while all the other people sit in the audience.

The psychodrama begins with the help of the *auxiliary egos* chosen by the protagonist among the audience; **there are no professional auxiliary egos.**

In this important moment of public psychodrama **we move from the narrative to the stage action, from the listened contents to the visible scene, from the narrative-verbal level to the iconic-scenic level.**

The social world represented by the audience is a **respectful witness** to what happens on the scene.

This aspect is particularly important: *"giving dignity to the stories by ordinary people"* (J. Fox). Dignity and respect take on a special value because they take place in a public context.

The public psychodrama audience does not correspond to the group of psychodrama (which is intimate and stable), but it is a **heterogeneous group, it is representative of the multiplicity and diversity of the social world.**

Step 6. The care and taking care of the common people

During the psychodramatic action, the group is involved not only as a reservoir of possible auxiliary egos, but also as a **chorus** and **social mirror**, and particularly urging the willingness to **double** the protagonist.

In public psychodrama, the richness of doubles and their multiplicity facilitate the audience proximity to the protagonist and the opening of wide exploration possibilities of the performed story.

The protagonist is often invited to come back to the audience and **watch the scene from its point of view** (the audience point of view).

The audience contributes to the creation of the story (which becomes the story of the group, an emerging group story that resounds in the social sphere).

The social sphere resonates in the protagonist as proof, listening and active participation.

The story representation in public psychodrama highlights two important aspects that are common to both psychodrama and Playback Theater:

1. **give dignity to the story**, through **empathy** and **TELE (double function)**, **mirroring** and external reference (**mirror function**);
2. the possibility to realize reciprocal **"acts of service"** (J. Fox), in other words "acts of care" by the common people in a public, community and solidarity context.

... Every person can be therapeutic agent for another human being...

... Psychodrama is neither theater nor psychology but a new combination of the two... it's often called the psychotherapy of people, made by people for people. Psychodrama offers procedures in which science and art are mixed.
(J. L. Moreno)

Step 7. Sharing

At the end, the auxiliary egos dismissed and the scene unmade, the protagonist sits next to the director on the scene in front of the audience and listens to the experiences of the participants.

This is the central and final place for the **encounter between personal dimension and social dimension**. The richness of the resonances in the group enhances the multiplicity and the complexity, favours multiple identifications, differentiations, new narrations... The comparison with the social world is borrowed from the experience, from the encounter with the others and from the **TELE**.

Step 8. The narration and the illustration of the story after the public psychodrama.

For several years, the story performed on the psychodramatic scene was narrated and illustrated by a participant.

In this way the story can return to the narrator and to the group, re-told and re-signified by the path of human and social encounter with others.

After some time the participants can integrate the sense of the story, with a reflective look and with a greater distance from the emotions of the psychodramatic scene.

The narrator and illustrator of the stories explains the meaning of this moment.

*"I tried, in a narrative attempt, to return the story to the person who told it, after having seen it with my own eyes... So the illustrations are born from the desire **to make visible that image every story creates...***

... So the stories become my stories in this very moment, at the end of the journey. I listened to the stories told on the scene, sometimes with my eyes wide open, amazed like a child, sometimes from the most hidden part of the theatre... almost to distance myself from hard topics... sometimes as the protagonist's alter ego or playing a character or an object...

*... Keeping these stretches of life tight, I told them again, as if in a role reversal with the narrator, using my categories, perceptions, feelings and emotions **born from the active listening of the story**. I tried, in a narrative attempt, to return the story to the person who told it, after having seen it with my own eyes. **It is a kind of mirror** that, story after story, has shaped a subjective and emotional narration, in the strict respect of the plot and the emotions of the narrators." (G. Peli)*

Narrating himself, the protagonist affirms in front of himself, and to the world, his story, the one he carried in himself and the one he saw through the psychodramatic play.

...Then there is the narration of the observer-narrator, who in the *here and now* of the representation, recovers and rethinks a canvas that is another point of view and that acquires the dignity of a story that can be told "to everyone", as **storytellers** do.

Finally, that fragment of life represented, re-lived and rewritten becomes an image, a condensation of emotions, a visual *haiku* in which to mirror oneself.”
Here is one of these illustrated stories (in attach).

REFERENCES

D. Bustos, *Basic Psychodramatic Techiques*, in The International FORUM Of Group Psychotherapy, IAGP Rewiew, www.iagp.com , Sao Paulo Brasil, 1995

A. Cocchi, *La vita in gioco - psicodramma e sociodramma nel teatro pubblico*, (Life in Play - psychodrama and sociodramma in public theatre) Franco Angeli, milano, 2003

L. Dotti - G.Peli, *Storie che curano: lo psicodramma pubblico* (Stories That Cure: public psychodrama), FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2011

L. Dotti - G. Peli, *La cura delle storie: lo psicodramma tra narrazione e illustrazione*, (Le Cure Of The Stories: psychodrama between narration and illustration) Teatro di psicodramma, Provaglio d'Iseo Bs, <http://teatro.psicosociodramma.it>

J. Fox, *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre*, Tusitala, New Platz, NY, 1994

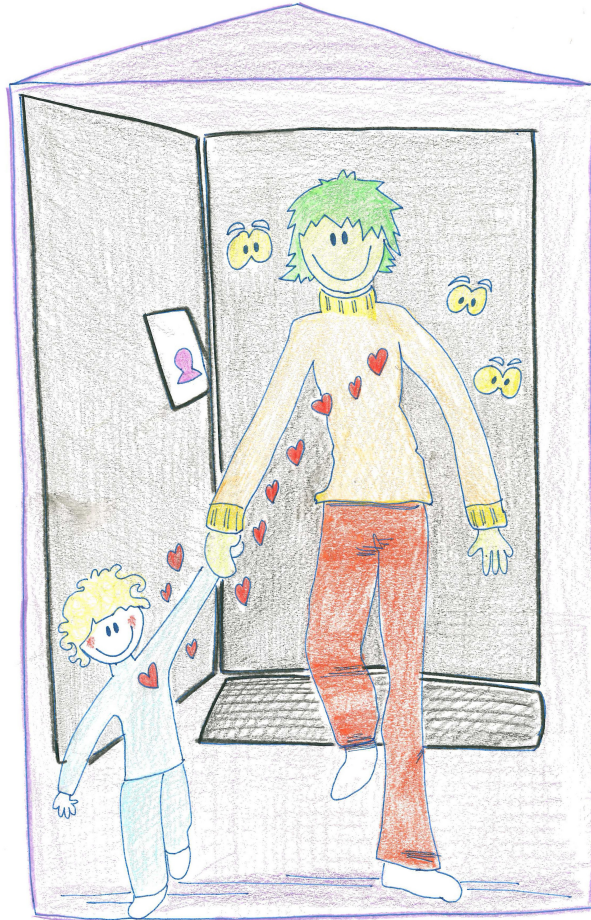
J. L. Moreno, *Il teatro della spontaneità* (The Theatre of Spontaneity), Di Renzo Roma, 2017

J. L. Moreno, *Manuale di psicodramma*, vol 1 (Psychodrama I), Astrolabio, Roma, 1985

Author: Luigi Dotti, teatro@psicosociodramma.it - www.psicosociodramma.it

MY GIANT

(Title of public psychodrama : **Addictions**)



He usually arrived.

He looked like a giant in the middle of the room that came to take me away.
Get away from that new home.

Get away from those four walls.

To me, it seemed like a long journey through that road, the lights and sounds of that ramshackle playroom seemed like heaven to me.

That was the only wonderland I had known until then.

Those moments gave to my early life the taste of being a child with a dad.

And it was wonderful to me to feel like a child with a dad, one of many. We almost looked like a family.

I was 5 years old and I do not remember the number of houses we already changed.

A subtle and unpleasant habit had shaped me and, even if so small, I knew how to adapt to every new home... like a dress that suits you.

The mother I had not chosen had put a twin brother beside me and along with him a drug addicted and under house arrest husband; she had only had the chance to become cold and hysterical.

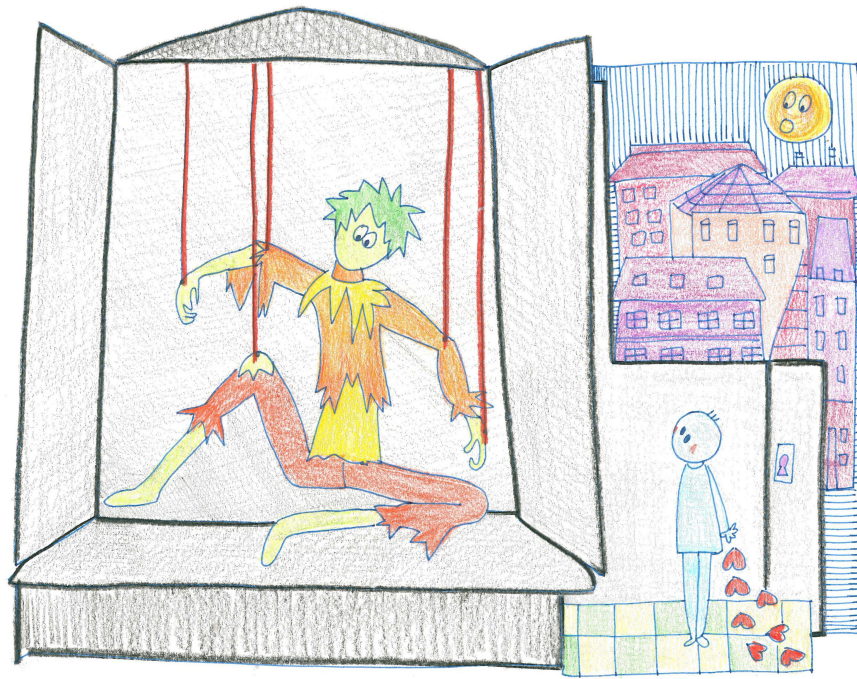
Poor mum.

Everything seemed so pathological, even though I did not know this term at the time.

That day the table was a good one, the one where normal families meet, and there, so small, I saw the show that would become the mark of my heart.

A part of me that I could not keep hidden, that has always been visible, disruptive, and destructive.

My giant that day was stoned with heroin; he had turned the whole table into a theatre. He looked like a puppet left there dangling, with nothing to add to that cheap show.



...

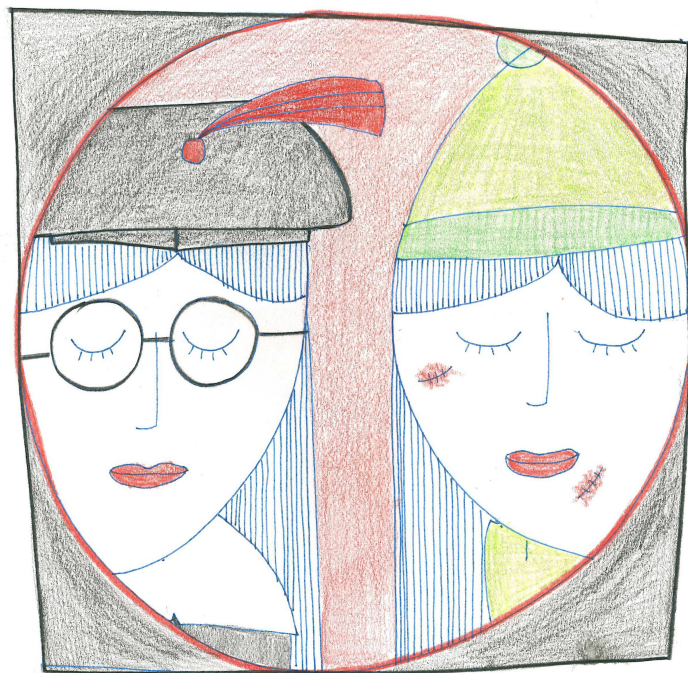
In the background there was my mother, a faded fire-eater with dull eyes and a too-soft heart.

Poor mum.

Dear Dad, now I have a new home, it is called rehabilitation centre, I eventually become like you.

Look at me. I am the bad copy of my twin brother, the one who goes to university and will find a job as it should be, in spite of the clichés on twins...all legends!

It was not like that for us two. Perhaps he was not sitting at the table in that distant show. Perhaps he did not see. And this has changed things.



(Paper for **XX IAGP Congress Malmo (Sweden) 1 - 4 august 2018:**

RISEING TIDES OF CHALLENGE AND HOPE

HEALING IDENTITY, IN SOCIETY, GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS)