

# Directing Sociodrama

*Rollo Browne*

While a sociodramatist might never actually direct a group sociodrama, there is considerable learning to be had from a well directed enactment. This paper outlines the structure and steps of a sociodrama, various techniques and interventions, what signs to look for and recognise, and generally what a director might do in directing a sociodrama. This paper is organised under the following three headings.

- Agreeing on Aims & Objectives: identifying the purpose of the sociodrama.
- Planning a Sociodrama: deciding how to use Morenian methods to achieve your goals.
- Conducting The Session: what the director pays attention to in a sociodrama.

## **Agreeing On Aims and Objectives**

The first step is to work out the purpose of directing a sociodrama in the specific context you are working in. There are two main contexts here. Firstly, someone asks you to do some work in their organisation or community group. Your starting point is what the organisation wants to achieve. The second context is where you offer a workshop and define the purpose based on who you want to attract and what you want to achieve. You can then go straight into the planning phase. The section below focuses on negotiating with a client organisation.

## **Negotiating The Brief**

Before planning a sociodrama the director has to meet with the client organisation to take the brief and work out a contract. They outline the context and what they want to achieve and in discussion this gets refined so that you have a workable contract. A workable contract is one where you both know what is expected and where there is a good chance of success, taking into account the context, the relevance of the issue, the people who need to be involved, their willingness to address the issue and the learning required.

The contract you reach with them must also be one that the intended participants can support otherwise it will need to be adjusted or renegotiated when the group meets.

During the discussion I am assessing whether a sociodrama will achieve what is required. For me the most crucial question is: What is the objective of doing a sociodrama on this topic with this group of people? It is here that the working assumptions I make about what sociodrama is and how it works influence whether it can be effectively used with this group. The second question is “Will participants warm up to valuing action-insight from their experience of the social system as it is?” This indicates whether they are likely to mobilise their own spontaneity to intervene in that social system and reconfigure it. The third question is “What is the sociodramatic question?”

At a meeting with the manager at a large engineering workshop I learn that team dynamics in the senior team keep getting bogged down in recrimination and blame. The brief is to clarify roles and communication in the team. As a sociodramatist I picture the system surrounding the team and imagine who might be involved and what consequences might be. I ask the manager if the team dynamics are

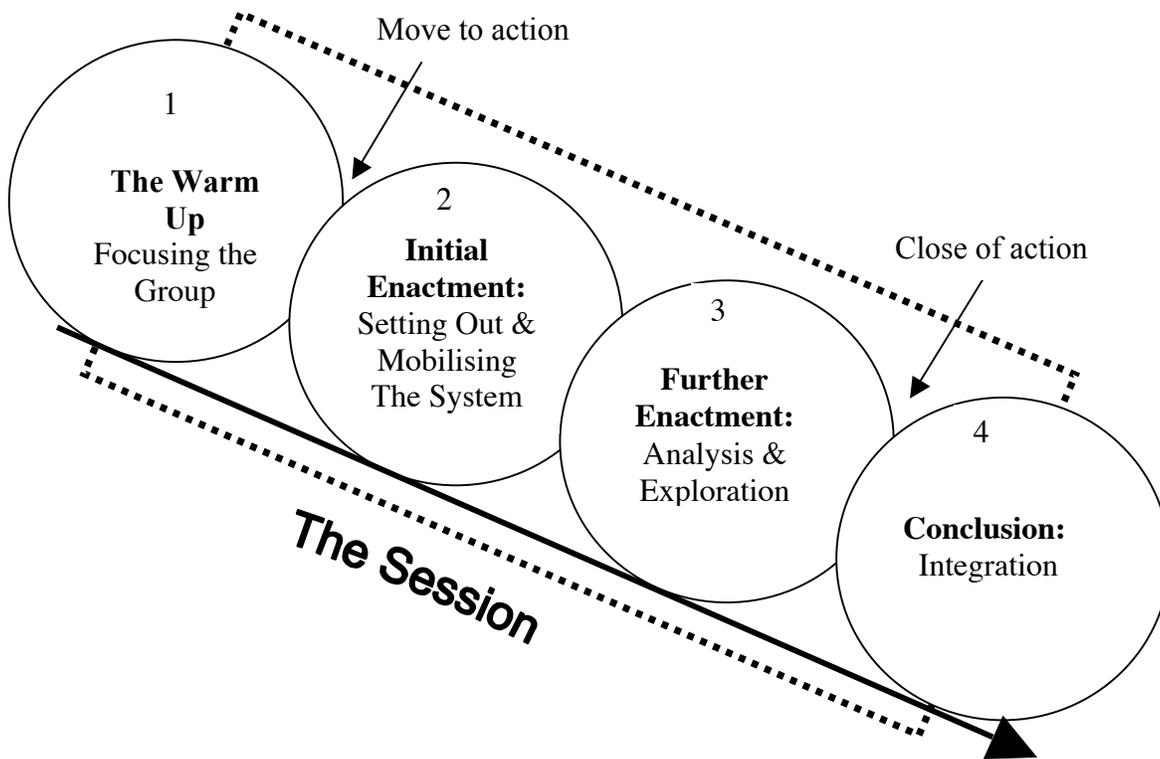
having an effect on the way the maintenance workshop operates and on their customers and if this too is part of the brief. “I hadn’t thought of that, but yes” is the reply. So the brief is expanded beyond the senior team. When I picture what it would be like to set out the key players and customers in the system and have them interact I realise I need to find out a bit more about their business. For example, what ongoing issue really gets the team dynamics polarised around recrimination and blame. As the meeting progresses I further refine whether a sociodrama will serve their needs.

Once there is a workable contract then I can make a plan for the session on how to achieve the outcome and whether to use a sociodramatic enactment.

### Planning a Sociodrama

There is a structure to a sociodrama that is similar to enactments in all Moreno’s applied methods. The sociodrama typically unfolds in a sequence of four phases from the warm up to the integration of learning, see diagram below. This diagram assists both in planning and in the conduct of the sociodrama.

**Diagram**      *The Four Phases of a Sociodrama*



It is not possible to plan much beyond the warm up phase because the drama will be a co-creation. The director pays particular attention to getting the warm up right so that the objectives can be met. The director plans the initial events to create a positive environment and sustain a suitable warm up to doing the work of the group. The director builds the warm up around the work focus of the group, the degree

of warm up, how people will hear about the session, the roles to evoke in participants, the language to use and the sociodramatic question.

In the Warm Up (Phase 1) the director is concerned with heightening the attention of group members on those things that are relevant to the purpose of the group. Some of the warm up occurs prior to the session and some occurs at the beginning of the session itself.

In the Initial Enactment: Setting Out & Mobilising The System (Phase 2) the action begins. Those involved in the sociodrama, the stakeholders, are ‘brought onto’ the stage using auxiliaries, and the system is set out. Group members see how these stakeholders interact. This continues to deepen the warm up in the participants.

In Further Enactment: Analysis and Exploration (Phase 3) the participants make an analysis of the system. Group members draw on their spontaneity and enter the surplus reality of the enacted system. The enactment takes on a life of its own and the unexpected can and often does emerge before our very eyes. At a suitable point the director ends the enactment.

In the Conclusion: Integration (Phase 4) the group members make sense of what happened, what was learned and how this might apply to their everyday lives. The session concludes although integration of the experience continues afterwards.

In the following sections, these phases are discussed from the point of view of the director.

## **Conducting The Sociodrama Session**

### **Phase 1 The Warm Up**

At the beginning of the session the director builds on the warm up started prior to the session, links participants together, warms up group members to their purpose for being there and how they will work together.

The director makes an introduction that frames the session and outlines the sociodramatic question and then conducts the warm up phase so that members are engaged and warm up fully to the work they are there to do. The warm up phase can be done either as a *director-directed warm up* of structured and sociometric activities towards a specific presenting issue or through a *group-centred warm up* where the director identifies the issue or theme from participants’ interests or concerns. Once the group has a unified focus and the warm up to purposeful action is sufficient the group moves into an exploration of the issues.

In organisations I typically conduct a director-directed warm up to emphasise the purpose and orient the group to working together. With 60 leaders of a large utility company focusing on leadership challenges we enacted a short sociodrama about a situation that faced a typical manager. This session followed work on their leadership charter, what it meant and on the values they wanted to carry forward into the next phase of the organisation. The purpose was carried in the sociodramatic question “How can we better manage conflicting pressures so that our leadership is based on our values”.

In this phase I have found it helpful to stay aware of

- Managing the warm up so it is both personal and socially focused
- Maintaining my purpose as a director

### **Managing The Warm Up**

After framing the session the director works with what the participants bring forward in the context of the purpose of the group. The director refines the sociodramatic question so that there is a clear group focus.

The point is that the director manages the level of warm up so it is congruent with the group purpose. In the example of the utility company the level of work is with them as leaders. There is a social focus on them as leaders in their organisation and a personal focus in the situations they face. In the warm up they discussed in pairs a situation they faced that challenged their leadership and the kind of pressure they were under as they did so. In the large group a number of them spoke about situations they faced. This oriented the group to the reality of leadership and to working together. The paired discussion emphasises their personal link to the question and in the large group they warm up to the situations they have in common. I subsequently select the scene we will enact so that it carries the social focus and the sociodramatic question.

Sometimes individuals warm up in ways that are counter to group norms or the purpose or something unexpected happens. When this occurs it is important to maintain your purpose as the director so that the warm up phase continues and the group reaches agreement about how the work will proceed.

### **Maintaining Purpose As Director**

*“Warm up is quite often incongruent. To get a congruent warm up you [the director] need to fill yourself with a single purpose”.* (Parry 1985)

As we have seen, focusing on a sociodramatic question is a way to fill the group with a single purpose. This is also true of the director who at any moment has to be able to build on what is happening in the group and link everything back to the work.

I find that once I am clear about the sociodramatic question and how it links to the purpose of the group I am less easily distracted by the range of things that occur in group life. What helps me is to be prepared to articulate the purpose of what we are doing at the drop of a hat. This acts as a compass that assists me as the director to hold that purpose as ‘magnetic north’ amidst the chaos of group life, the multiple possibilities inherent in a scene, and the sheer complexity of social issues. Knowing ‘magnetic north’ helps me assess where and how to intervene in the enactment.

## **Phase 2 Initial Enactment: Setting Out & Mobilising The System**

### **The Move To Action**

Once the group is unified around a single purpose the move to action occurs. Often the starting point for exploring the sociodramatic question is a scene where the social dilemma is acutely felt. This may be the real life situation of one of the group members. If the presenting situation is carried by (known to) a single individual the enactment is a *protagonist-centred sociodrama*. If the situation is more generally shared across the participants then the enactment is a *group-centred sociodrama* (Parry

1985). This influences how the director makes the move into action and how the elements that make up the social system being investigated are set out. In a protagonist-centred sociodrama these elements are drawn from the individual protagonist. The protagonist is working on behalf of the group. In a group-centred sociodrama these elements are drawn from group members. In that case the group itself is the protagonist.

### **Setting Out and Mobilising The System**

The purpose of the Initial Enactment is to set out the system and mobilise it so that the group can experience it. The director uses the full range of dramatic production techniques (such as placement on the stage, interview for role, asides) to bring out and make visible the situation as it is. Once the scene is set and the roles are clear, the director mobilises the system by asking everyone to act their role simultaneously. This is a depiction of the cultural conserve around the presenting issue or dilemma in the group so that the group can make an analysis. In this phase it is important to bring out all significant elements in the system otherwise the analysis will be inadequate and so will any intervention into the system. These may include aspects of surplus reality such as absent or ‘ghost’ elements that are nonetheless present, for example, people who have been sacked or the ideals of a long dead founder<sup>1</sup>.

The setting out, the mobilising of the system are experienced in action. In itself the setting out of a system is a powerful event and contains both thought and deep feeling. However the mobilisation of a complex system is often chaotic and can be daunting.

In my experience this is the phase where many sociodramas fail. This is because the director loses his or her nerve in holding the group long enough to experience deeply the system as a whole, especially if that experience is unpleasant or depressing. For example in a scene about the aged care system there were participants with parents in care and who found the enactment excruciating because they felt they could do nothing to change how aged care works.. The director experienced the anxiety of the group and its desire to move on but did not do so. By holding the group at this point and asking participants to stay in touch with their responses to the whole system the group was faced with its despair at changing large bureaucratic systems. Only when the depth of feeling was acknowledged at a group level could the group mobilize its spontaneity and resourcefulness to address issues in a way that was enabling. The initial impatience with the enactment and the speed with which blame was being passed to someone else are some of the restrictive solutions that may be enacted by group members to avoid experiencing the discomfort.<sup>2</sup>

One of Moreno’s operating principles is that group members experience the social system as-it-is in order to mobilise the spontaneity and creativity needed to begin healing, learning or generating options for change.

If in setting out the system, the director only sets out limited aspects of the system as a whole this reduces the ability of the group to get in touch with their hopes and fears about the situation and will therefore skew the group’s ability to release creativity and spontaneity into creating enabling solutions. Sociodrama offers a method of experiencing both hopes and fears deeply enough to apply these life

---

<sup>1</sup> Surplus reality is a concept of Moreno’s that has been taken up or reinvented by other writers. For example, ‘Ghost’ roles are also found in Process Oriented Psychology (Mindell 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Restrictive and enabling solutions are part of the Focal Conflict Model of group behaviour developed by Whitaker and Lieberman (1964). Restrictive solutions are driven by discomfort arising out of hopes and fears around presenting issues.

processes to larger social issues – as long as we directors can hold our nerve. This involves the director holding his or her role in the face of the potential chaos of the mobilised system, the sheer unpredictability of what might emerge and the disturbance of deep and perhaps unwanted responses to the system and then linking what is happening in the group back to the purpose for being there.

### **Phase 3 Further Enactment: Analysis & Exploration**

This phase involves the analysis and exploration of the system. The direction of the exploration depends on the analysis but in practice these run hand in hand. The logic of a sociodrama is clear enough. The system is set out and mobilised, the group members experience the system as-it-is, make an analysis and then further explore the system on that basis. The purpose of this phase is to release the group spontaneity so that group members find a new response to the situation that goes further than existing conserved responses.

The purpose of the analysis is for group members to make collective sense of their experience of the system, understand how social forces shape system behaviour and develop a fresh perspective. Actually participants begin to experience, be affected by and think about the social forces and systemic patterns on the stage as soon as the enactment starts. Once enough of the system as a whole is mobilised the director seeks to bring out the group's responses to the system as-it-is. The question for the director is at which point to focus the group on analysis. The extent and quality of the analysis may vary but the point is that the group comes to an awareness of what is happening and what their responses to it are. They may or may not have ideas about what to do about it.

It is important that there is a collective analysis. If the group is not involved in the analysis then participants are less likely to warm up to collaborating around an effective response to the issue. Any subsequent exploration becomes skewed, most likely away from deep feeling. A full response to the system as a whole is part of an analysis and is part of bringing the spontaneity of group members to bear on the group issue.

At times the director has already made an analysis about what the system needs and therefore sets out only that aspect of the system that fits his or her conclusions. In this case the director is making a more targeted intervention consistent with 'sociodramatic role training'. There is nothing wrong with this. It may be perfectly in tune with the purpose of the group and exactly what is needed.

In practice the logical sequence, outlined above, of analysis followed by exploration is not always so clear cut. Once the system is mobilised the enactment often evolves organically as group members act from their roles and new aspects of system life emerge. Group members respond, make their analysis on the run, bring their understanding into their roles and a fresh interaction develops. This is all 'grist for the mill'. Analysis is going on all the time, the point here is to make collective sense of what is happening in the system. There can be several points of analysis each followed by further exploration.

In one sociodrama, after the system in an office was set out and mobilised several participants immediately began trying interventions to address the core issue as they saw it. They had clearly formed their own individual analysis and were acting on it. The group appeared interested in what might happen. As director, I followed their warm up and as a group we then focused on the response of office members and the system as a whole to their intervention. In that case there was no collective

analysis beforehand, we had moved quickly to test some interventions and learned about the office system as we went along. In this case, exploration first, analysis afterwards.

There is no one right way to do this. Each sociodrama director needs to find their own way. Social systems are dynamic, and individual and group responses do not follow a logical sequence, so the director, while clearly holding the purpose for the group, needs to stay fluid about the way the system is explored.

### **Interventions to Deepen Understanding of Social Systems**

Nevertheless the loose sequence of analysis followed by further exploration is useful because it allows us to clarify how we deepen our understanding of a social system. There are a number of interventions available to the director. The first three more obviously lend themselves to collective analysis.

- Systemic Statements
- Focusing On Subgroups & Their Relationships
- Stop and Reflect
- Continuing the Enactment
- Testing The System
- Trialling Interventions

#### a) Systemic Statements

The director creates an awareness of the culture being enacted through the use of systemic statements. Participants benefit from developing their role as systems analyst through making sense of what is going on. One powerful way to warm them up to their experience of the system as a whole is for the director to make systemic statements about what is being enacted. Group members also make their own observations of what they see happening in the system. Observations take a number of forms. They may:

- i) relate to posture and distance. *“There are four subgroups standing a long way from each other. All are facing inwards.”*
- ii) name explicit behaviour, *“There is a lot of glancing around but little contact.”* *“Everyone is looking for someone else to speak first.”*
- iii) name values and worldviews in different parts of the system. *“This is a world in which ... suspicion is rife.”* *“The world works best when ...”*<sup>3</sup>
- iv) speak the unspoken. *“Tension has suddenly risen. No-one is prepared to name the real issue.”*
- v) link the experience in the enacted system back to their workplaces. *“This is exactly what happens in your executive meetings. Everyone shuts down and bitches outside the meeting.”*

#### b) Focusing On Subgroups & Their Relationships

The director can deepen the exploration by explicitly drawing out the worldview and values of significant subgroups about how they see themselves, others and the system as a whole. Typical questions might include: *“Who are you? What do you promote? What do you stand for? How do you relate to others?”* This intervention brings out some of the patterns in the group that will assist group members make a running analysis of what is going on.

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a potent intervention discussed in the context of working with cultural diversity issues by Jenny Hutt (2002).

c) Stop and Reflect

At times the multiple interactions happening at once can be confusing or even overwhelming. One way to contain this is to stop the action and have the participants take stock of what is happening. The director can use a series of questions to focus participants on what they need to progress the drama or in some other way link to the sociodramatic question. As participants discuss their experience they are of course making an analysis of what is going on and clarifying their response to the system.

During this discussion participants clarify their responses to the system as it is and in so doing have made some analysis of the patterns of behaviour and system dynamics, perhaps deciding what interventions to make to reconfigure the social system or adjust the roles they have taken. This does not always need to be expressed to the group as a whole. The action can simply continue. In this case the next step is to set a scene to explore how the system responds to these developments.

d) Continuing The Enactment

Once the system as-it-is is mobilised the simplest thing for the director to do is to get curious about what is happening and produce further enactment. In this way the values and dynamics of the system become more evident. This is done using the range of Morenian dramatic techniques, such as placement on the stage, interview for role, building interaction between elements of the system and creating a new scene. The central techniques of doubling, mirroring and role reversal are used to extend awareness. However these look different in a sociodrama.

As the focus is on working with social forces and frequently subgroups, doubling occurs when a subgroup gets together and works out their core values. Having a number of people enter the social role of, say, irate parents at the closing of a child care centre, allows those people to extend their experience and learn more about that world than by simply using a single person in the role. Likewise mirroring and role reversal occur in entire subgroups so that the collective as well as the personal nature of the role is experienced.

e) Testing a System

A lot can be learned about how a system operates when a system becomes stressed. One method is for the director to introduce a crisis into order to see how the system as a whole responds. For example, in a hospital scene, evidence is found that a batch of blood they have been using is contaminated. Subsequently, a demonstration takes place outside the entrance to demand change. The press and TV cameras arrive. How will the subgroups and the system as a whole respond?

Or, in a workplace restructure, the boss announces that 4 positions will be cut and that the team should decide who will go. The staff members hold a meeting. *“It’s just before the scheduled time, in your roles warm up to yourself and the situation and come and take your place in the meeting room.”* These stressors are designed to bring out more of the underlying characteristics of the system being explored.

f) Trialling Interventions Into The System

A staff group decides that the thing to do is to send a delegation to the boss about the restructure. A new scene is set and the interaction is played out. There is a lot of learning here as it refines the issues the delegation needs to take account of in planning to take effective action. This is a similar phase to the role test in a role training session. Does the group have the necessary roles to transform the social system, reconfigure it or learn how to manage it better? Such roles may emerge naturally out of the

group experience or the group may want to experiment with a variety of approaches and learn from each other. For the director, the choice of this intervention depends on whether this will meet the objectives of the session. At this stage we are very near to the close of the action phase of the sociodrama.

### **The Critical Moment**

Sometimes during an enactment the unexpected emerges. A moment of magic where in the controlled environment of the sociodrama the group produces something so true that it captures the life of the system being investigated. The director's role here is to bring this out and have the participants pay attention to it. The key is to name what is happening and link it to the purpose of the exploration. About 40 minutes into a sociodrama on bringing spontaneity back into life in the classroom, a participant in the back of the class burst into tears. At this point the director takes up the role of 'social systems teacher' pointing out what is significant and why.

*“So this is it. This is exactly what happens in schools. There is a lot of grief here and nobody seems to know what to do with it. We are all shocked. And we're about to carry on as if nothing has happened.”*

These kinds of moments are like jewels in the life of a sociodrama if the director can grasp them sufficiently to anchor the whole experience back into the life of the group. There is deep feeling and there is insight into the system as a whole what can be crystallised into significant learning. I know this because while I have missed many such moments, the few times I have named it the profundity of learning is palpable.

The director links what happens in that moment to the individual and collective concerns of the group. At that point the sociodramatic question again becomes a potent guide. *“Yes. How can we bring life back into a system where we are engaged in just surviving?”*

From this point the sociodrama may move into further exploration, or even trialling of various interventions to see what might be learned about how to reconfigure the social forces involved.

### **Ending the Action**

The director ends the drama when the exploration has reached its peak or after there is some action-insight related to the purpose of the drama and the sociodramatic question. Sometimes it is not easy to tell, which usually indicates that the level of the drama is not very deep. One of the beliefs I have had to develop as a director is that whatever happens in the enactment there is sufficient learning that is of value for participants. It is part of the role of the director to be confident that participants will learn from their experience. The articulation of learning occurs in the next phase of the sociodrama.

### **Phase 4 Conclusion**

Following the enactment the phase of integration occurs. This brings closure to the piece of work by reconnecting group members together, reminding them of the purpose of the exploration - the sociodramatic question, by anchoring the experience through sharing about what was learned and insights into the situation explored.

In a sociodrama the director invites a range of sharing from participants including

- from their personal experience in role. *“As a student I got overwhelmed by all the others.”*

- from their experience in role about the system and social forces: *As an isolated student I began to realise how important the teacher's perception of me was. I felt trapped by my peers judging me and no-one else realised this.*"
- from themselves as a group member relating to their personal life. *"While it was going on I found myself getting more resentful and rebellious. This relates to my conflict with authority figures – a pattern in my working life."*
- from themselves as a group member relating to social systems they are part of. *"As a parent I see that my school is not that interested in feedback. Parents like me, who are concerned about what happens in class, end up acting alone. It's the same in my workplace. Even when I know that I ought to tell my manager about the effect of his decision, I hesitate because it's too easily taken as criticism and then dismissed as my problem to solve."*

Although the group is the protagonist, it is helpful to bear in mind that each participant learns as an individual. Hence learning will be maximized when group members bring out the implications of what the sociodrama means to them and the next steps they might take. Often this requires extensive small group discussion to make sense of their experience of the system as a whole and to make action plans.

Integrating the learning from a sociodrama requires reflection time for each individual. The director must allow for this when planning the session otherwise the learning from the experience will be diminished.

This paper summarises the steps that a director might take when directing a sociodrama and what they pay attention to in each step. However it is not meant to be prescriptive. In practice the director, while grounded in Morenian principles and methodology, improvises and shapes the work to suit the group and its purpose. In the end every director has to work with the group and its concerns in the moment.

## References

- Hutt J (2001), *Exploring the Impact of Cultural Norms on Creativity at Work*, Thesis, Australian And New Zealand Psychodrama Association.
- Mindell A (1995), *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity*, Lao Tse Press, Seattle.
- Parry W (1985), unpublished transcripts and papers, The Training Practicum (Sociodrama), The Wasley Centre, Perth WA.
- Whittaker D and Lieberman M (1964), *Psychotherapy Through The Group Process*, Atherton Press, New York