

“I Invite Each of Us to Speak our Truth”-On Sociopsychodrama

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Abstract

In this article, the opening line from the first sociodrama in the Komödienhaus theater house, in Vienna, on April 1st 1921, “I invite each of us to speak our truth”, will be given a central space. With this line as a reference, we want to discuss what sociodrama – and later on sociopsychodrama – is and can be, both in theory and in practice. On the basis of the event “Simultaneous World Sociopsychodrama” on December 21st 2013, we will discuss sociopsychodrama with reference to democracy, art and conceptions of knowledge. The sociopsychodramatic work in Trondheim, Norway, this evening will constitute the center of gravity in the material to be explored. Here we describe how the sociopsychodramatic scene was created and present, but also how participant’s experiences the production through three descriptive categories.

Keywords: Sociodrama/Sociopsychodrama; Democracy; Understanding of art; Phronesis; Sociopsychodrama production

Introduction

“I invite each of us to speak our truth.” The line is the very¹ first to be pronounced at the evening show in the Komödienhaus theater house in Vienna on April 1st 1921. Alone on stage stands Jacob Levy Moreno, dressed in the costume of the court jester, ready to act the role of the jester. The curtain is pulled aside. On stage is a king’s throne, on its side a king’s crown and cape. The background for this scenic image is the current political situation in Austria. The country is in political turmoil, lacking in government and leadership. The king’s throne and crown are weighty symbols of leadership and power. The jester is the one who can speak openly, it is he who can ask and say what nobody else can. Now he asks the audience about their ideas and perceptions of the government and leadership of Austria, a country which is in the process of breaking up. The theatre is packed with curious spectators. They are government officials, politicians, regular theater goers, friends of Moreno and friends of friends. He invites the audience on stage, invites them to take the role as the new leader and thereby contribute with new ideas on the government of Austria, contribute with new actions for a better future. The show, which had been announced in the newspaper days ahead, lasts for two hours. The show received poor reviews; the critics concluded that it was most likely an April fool’s Show.

Looking back at the performance [1], history tells us that it was not an April fool’s show. Rather, it marked the beginning of sociodrama as a dramatic form.² In this article, the opening line from April 1st 1921, “I invite each of us to speak our truth”, will be given a central space.

With this line as a reference, we want to discuss what sociodrama – and later on sociopsychodrama – is and can be, both in theory and in practice. On the basis of the event “Simultaneous World Sociopsychodrama” on December 21st 2013, we will discuss sociopsychodrama with reference to democracy, art and conceptions of knowledge. The sociopsychodramatic work in Trondheim, Norway, this evening will constitute a center of gravity in the material to be explored. We describe how the sociopsychodramatic scene was created and presented. How participants experienced the production is described by the use of three descriptive categories.

Sociodrama and Democracy

Everybody was invited on stage as potential actors. This was new. The audience didn’t quite know what they were about to take part in. It was, then as now, strange to invite all, “...each of us...”, to take part in a theater play. The opening line from 1921 invited all to take part. In Komödienhaus they had always received theater, never taken part. We all have a need to know what we are about to take part in, and perhaps does this apply especially to the theater, and not the least for the conventionally influenced Vienna audience of 1921. To them, the thought of taking part in a performance was unheard of. To participate takes preparation and warming up. The same goes for sociodrama. May be the audience wasn’t adequately prepared for participation when sociodrama first was introduced? In sociodrama the whole group is invited to take part: “The true subject of the sociodrama is the group...³”, Moreno writes. Sociodrama deals with matters larger than the individual and how this “larger” influences back on the individual. In sociodrama, collective and social roles are embodied and in 1921 the topic was leadership and democracy in the Austrian society. Since

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² There is more to be read about this performance in Marineau, 1989, p 70-71

³ Moreno 1999, p 59

then, sociodrama has been linked to democratic participation. To invite everyone to participate is an example of living democracy. The ideal of democracy is built on everyone's right and duty to participate. Such an ideal takes openness and co-leadership. A living democracy is created through participation; it has to be created again and again. In this sense, sociodrama is an example of living democracy, also the one in 1921.

Some years earlier John Dewey wrote on democracy as an idea. In "Democracy and Education"⁴ from 1916 he writes about how one can foster democracy through education. With him we meet a conception of democracy that has two sides. One is linked to political democracy, the other to democracy as an idea and a way of living. A political democracy includes the right to vote and chose representatives, while the democratic idea may be understood as a way of living where people are bound together through exchange and sharing. This is the form of democracy Dewey considers most important⁵. According to him, the exercise of democracy is fundamental; it is a right in society which, through participation, gives the individual the chance to make new experiences. Experience here is not only everyday occurrences, but results of a series of occurrences which are linked together through participation and co-creation. On this background it is possible to understand the invitation to "...each of us..." on April 1st 1921 as a democratic practice [2].

"Simultaneous World Sociopsychodrama"

The initiative for the worldwide sociopsychodrama event came from Monica Zuretti in Argentina. She was trained by Jacob Levy Moreno and Zerka Moreno in 1969/70. Over 40 years of practice Monica Zuretti has developed further Moreno's sociodramatic work to the form sociopsychodrama. The starting point in sociopsychodrama is the group's social and collective roles. At the same time one works on the basis that these roles are experienced by someone and that these experiences are rooted in each individual. The basic thought is that before a social or collective role can be played and put to life in a dramatic production, the group needs ideas and images about what distinguishes and characterizes this role. Subsequently, in this form, it is not sufficient "only" to play a social or collective role, the role has to be linked to the experiences of the individual. The work is done on the basis of the thought that the social and psychological are linked, that individual and society are linked. This is also Moreno's basic assumption when he says that there exists a floating boundary between sociodrama and psychodrama⁶.

Nearly a hundred years after the first sociodrama, on December 21st 2013, "...each of us..." constituted more than 80 groups in 30 countries spread around the world. Independent of each other, groups met, at the same time and with the same title, "Simultaneous World Sociopsychodrama", to investigate questions like: what can I do for myself? What can I do for my family? What can I do for my community? What can I do for my country? What can I do for the

world? What can I do for cosmos? Groups were established in Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, China, New Zealand, Croatia, Israel, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Switzerland, Hungary, Spain, France, Bulgaria, Turkey, Canada and Norway. Simultaneously, and in sociopsychodramatic form, the groups investigated the questions above. This also took place in Trondheim, Norway, where a group of 19 participants met from 3 to 6 pm. The gathering was organized by the "Professional development group for sociodrama, psychodrama and sociometry in Trondheim"⁷.

Understanding of Art

When "...each of us..." is pronounced in a theater, the line falls within the framework of an art form; the art form theater. In this context the line also represents a certain view of art. Normally, we think of theater as a reception form where the actors act and the audience receives and experiences theater. Within this understanding, theater is an act for an audience. The play is experienced by the recipient, the audience. In this way theater art aids comprehension through the possibility to experience and feel at a distance, through our senses. To a lesser extent have we been concerned with what we experience, sense and not the least learn when we take part in theater; when we participate ourselves. In sociopsychodrama, theater becomes more than a performance of written drama in front of an audience. Sociopsychodrama opens up to an understanding of art that emphasizes the perspective of the participant. To see oneself as co-creator and participant in the work of art and in culture is, as we have seen, the starting point for sociodrama. Moreno got the inspiration for such a participant perspective on art from an art movement he took part in himself in Vienna. The art movement is called expressionism. It was from this movement the concept of the art of living arose. For Moreno, the art of living was meeting and old situation in a new way and a new situation in an adequate way. Later on he turned this into his credo and defined it as spontaneity. It was within the framework of expressionism that Moreno developed an understanding of the art of living; to him it represented a view on art⁸. A characteristic of the varying forms of expression in this movement was its intention to express the truth of the situation, the truth behind the masque and the masque play. In that respect the Vienna culture's masque play and conventions were a source of inspiration to art practice for Moreno. The first sociodrama is mentioned here as an example [3].

Inspired by the pedagogue John Dewey the understanding of art would reach beyond the territory of art and include life and learning in general. Moreno and Dewey inspired each other mutually. When Moreno moved to the United States in 1925, he said that he moved to "the land of Dewey"⁹. Dewey on his part was member of "The editorial board of Sociometry"¹⁰ in the 1930ies and 40ies on Moreno's initiative. In their view on democracy, art, experience and participation we find common understanding between them. They both had a participants'

⁴ Dewey, John 1916, p 61

⁵ Dewey, John 1916, p 61

⁶ Moreno, 1993, p 59-60

⁷ "Professional development group for sociodrama, psychodrama and sociometry in Trondheim" aims at further developing the knowledge about Moreno's various contributions. The group is also co-organizer for a sociopsychodramatic education in cooperation with the PsykodramaAkademin Foundation in Sweden and Centro de Psicodrama y sociodrama Zerka T Moreno in Argentina.

⁸ Rasmussen, B and Kristoffersen, B, 2011, p 98

⁹ Baim and others, 2007, p 141

¹⁰ Fox, Jonathan, 1987, p xvii

perspective on art and learning; a perspective with particular relevance to sociopsychodrama. As Moreno, Dewey writes on "Art as experience"¹¹.

Art has a central position in what Dewey understands as a living democracy. The purpose of art is to create experiences, not only for the individual but for everyone who meets it. Art is created through a production which ends up in an expression, an expression of art. When the subject (the audience) meets the expression of art, a relation is established; an experience. In this situation the subject does and undergoes enough to create an experience, Dewey claims. Earlier experiences are weaved together with the new one. Dewey calls this esthetic experience¹². In sociopsychodrama the esthetic experience is created in the participatory production. The production and the expression of art coincide; they are not separate as we experience them in receptive art. In sociopsychodrama, attachment, sensing and the expression of art are woven together in the production itself, in one and the same piece. In this perspective, "one of us" becomes everybody's participation in the production of a piece of art, here and now. "An esthetic experience can be crowded into a moment only in the sense that a climax of prior enduring processes may arrive in an outstanding movement which sweeps everything else into it that all else is forgotten"¹³. This was the kind of esthetic experience that was prepared for in Trondheim on December 21st [4].

Trondheim, December 21st, 2013

Those who attended "Simultaneous World Psychodrama" in Trondheim on December 21st formed a new group. Some knew several and others knew a few. Several had no previous experience with sociopsychodrama. As we have seen from the earliest experiences with sociodrama, it takes several layers of actions before a group can express itself freely and unrestrained; before a group can "speak our truth". The context, the atmosphere, how one is met and how members warm up to other group members; all this works together and influences what later on grows and is produced in a group. To be met, to create room for meetings between people, is one of Moreno's most profound contributions. Early on he therefore found practice forms that deal with the interpersonal encounters, concrete encounters, "eye to eye, face to face"¹⁴.

The Importance of the Meeting

The first and most important when a group meets, is how one is met as a new member. The obvious and commonplace, like being greeted, to become a name among other names, to be included in the setting, is of importance to what is later created in sociopsychodrama, as goes for Trondheim on December 21st. The first topic in the group work therefore dealt with creating encounters. Moving around in the room, greeting the others both verbally and non-verbally, meeting looks, two and two, face to face, breathing at the same rate, becoming the moment together, touching the other and then going on, creating new encounters. Through an initial stroke a group may be linked slowly together, become more relaxed, attached and ready for subsequent productive work.

The second part is to gather the group around a common topic; in our context around the birth of the "Simultaneous World Sociopsychodrama" event. Through various narrative entrances based on three images, the background for the gathering was presented. One image showed the ceremony when Monica Zuretti was awarded the diploma as sociopsychodramatist in 1969. The other was a poster of Moreno; in the background we saw an architectural model of his theater as it was drawn before he immigrated to the US in 1925. At the bottom of the poster, stood the opening line from the performance in Komödienhaus: "I invite each of us to speak our truth." The third was an art poster for the same event. Through visual expressions and belonging narratives, the group was made participatory with the background for the event, they were made participants in the questions which formed the basis for "Simultaneous world Sociopsychodrama". The exploratory work could begin.

The Sociopsychodramatic Scene

At the sociopsychodramatic scene, a model of concentric circles was created, circles in the form of cloths in different colors were formed like one can see circles spread from a center when a stone is thrown in the water. The center of the model represented the question "What can I do for myself?" In the following circles followed the questions "What can I do for my family?", "What can I do for my community?" and so on. In pairs, group members were invited on stage to explore the varying questions together. By moving in different circle rings, conversations were developed and insights gained: where is my commitment at this stage? Is my focus on the little or the big world? From this conversation, a new group structure evolved when each person made their choice based on their commitment here and now. The new structure expanded the group; some placed themselves close to their community, others saw their efforts in a global perspective, their questions were related to what they could do for the world. New conversations arose among those who belonged to the same field of interest. What characterized their common commitment? Should they cooperate with someone? With whom? New conversations and choices were made. A third group constellation arose. The new groups were put to work together creating an improvised production, creating a scenic image expressing an essence, a common opinion on what characterized their cooperation. The following presentations were given different names: Umbutu, The Embryo, Reflection. Each of the scenic improvisations showed aspects dealing with exposed positions, vulnerability and dependence in a global perspective. With the help of shawls, props, body and voice, scenic expressions were produced; a culture can be set alive and a wounded earth can speak. The scenic productions gave those who were present in the room, there and then, a common survival linked to questions on cooperating, on the necessity of seeing oneself outside oneself, as part of a community, as part of the world [5].

In sociopsychodrama the art of the moment may take place; there the living body may find new ways of expression and not the least: one may produce in interplay with others. By participating with others, first two and two, then with the whole group, the threads from the evening on December 21st were wound up. What was experienced through the participation in this sociopsychodramatic production? In

¹¹ Dewey, 1934/1958

¹² Dewey, 1934/1958, p 56

¹³ Dewey, 1934/1958, p 56

¹⁴ Marineau, René, 1989, p 48

the room of the circle, experiences were shared, a total of fifteen participants shared during the conclusion. Different opinions and experiences were expressed. All in all it is possible to divide the response into three categories. 1) Some responded based on their personal gain: "this has given me inspiration", 2) others shared on the basis of experiences with the encounter, about linking themselves to the world: "I was inspired by the conversation with the woman at my side.... experienced that we were part of something bigger...". and 3) on being part of a participative practice: "...have experienced to be part of a creative we", and "I perceive a freedom in being able to see my questions from varying perspectives, the ones I have inside, the ones related to my family, community, Norway, the world, cosmos. I have really learned something I can bring along." The sharings were the response of the moment. Later on, a supplementary and nuanced response would have taken place, but in the room of the circle, there and then, those were the "truths" to be expressed.

What is learned and what knowledge can be retrieved from the actions described above? Is this only an eccentric activity for the especially interested? According to sociopsychodramatic thinking, it is not. Not only was Moreno inspired by children's play and how they learn through staging and gestalting of experiences from the surrounding world; he was also inspired by the early Greek thinkers, especially Socrates and Aristotle. With Aristotle we find the knowledge form *phronesis*. Through *phronesis*, the actions described above may give notions on what kind of knowledge we are talking about.

Understanding of Knowledge: *Phronesis* and our Time

Phronesis isn't commonly known. The term – the practical wisdom – was formed by Aristotle about 2300 years ago in a discussion about the conditions for a good life with others. It points to the ability to act in wise ways in specific situations. Since every situation is unique, rules and handbooks cannot fathom this wisdom, for *phronesis* is personal and interpersonal knowledge developed through experience. Aristotle links *phronesis* to the disciplines ethics and politics and considered it to constitute one of three forms of knowledge. The two others were *episteme*, theoretical knowledge (true and universal) and *techné*, a practical knowledge (proficiency in skills within craft and art, and in our time engineering and technology). Aristotle saw all three as meaningful in a balanced society, but *phronesis* was the most important because the other two could only find their place through it. Wisdom was important and on the basis of it, other kinds of knowledge could be obtained¹⁵. *Phronesis* is a forgotten term, but today we see, through ongoing research, how the term gains renewed relevance and is discussed from various professional perspectives¹⁶.

In our exploration of "I invite each of us to speak our truth" – on sociopsychodrama, we have searched for support in Dewey's democratic idea on everybody's right to participation as a life form – as the art of living. Exploring this, we have seen that people are bound together through exchange and sharing. The purpose of art in this is to create experiences for those who meet it. Dewey says that "In short, art, in its form unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy that makes an experience to be an experience".¹⁷

In the meeting with art this is called esthetic experience. Here we also have looked at sociopsychodrama in relation to Aristotle's term *phronesis* [6-9].

Sociopsychodrama, both in content and form, invites to participate. Here, interpersonal experiences may be made; questions from varying areas of life, from the single person to cosmos, may be investigated. Democracy as a form of living gets an expanded perspective in this. Moreno had a wide and complex view of life, but the core of his practice was joint experiences and to meet the other face to face. With him, *phronesis* as a form of knowledge is expressed as actions, through meeting an old situation in a new way and a new situation in an adequate way. Not the least have we seen here that several layers of actions are needed before a group can express itself freely and unrestrictedly, before everyone in a group can "speak our truth". In sociopsychodrama this is an aim.

Conclusion

The evening of December 21st in Trondheim started off with everyone being participants in a larger community. The evening also ended like that. Through a ritual, the work of the group was linked with the large network the group was part of. A ritual in the form of small candles was lit for each of the participating countries. Through the language of the ritual, the work of the group was linked together in an extended community practice [10-12].

In a living democracy we need arenas of exchange and sharing. Sociopsychodrama is a dramatic form where art of the moment may be created, where new knowledge may be achieved and a living democracy maintained, in one and the same piece. Nearly one hundred years have passed since Moreno opened with the line "I invite each of us to speak our truth" when he stood alone on stage. On December 21st, 80 groups spread out in 30 countries each in their own way cooperated and created new rooms for exchange and sharing.

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¹⁵ Flyvbjerg, 1996

¹⁶ Gustavsson, Groven, Skjervheim, Mollan and others

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