ACT HUNGER

Psychodrama is an action method in which people are encouraged to act spontaneously. Moreno saw in children’s play that they were hungry for action.

“When I look at a child, I see, “Yes, yes, yes, yes.” They do not have to learn to say, “Yes.” Being born is yes. You see spontaneity in the living form. It is written all over the child, in his act hunger, as he looks at things, as he listens to things, as he rushes into time, as he rushes into space, as he grabs for objects, as he smiles and cries. In the very beginning he sees no barriers in objects, no limits of distance, no resistances or prohibitions. But as objects hinder his locomotions and people respond to him with, “No, no, no,” he starts on his reactive phase, still reaching out, but with growing anxiety, fear, tension and caution.” (Moreno in Fox, 1987, 206)

Moreno linked the infant’s act hunger to spontaneity by pointing out that the infant insists on having its need satisfied in the here and now, immediately: “infantile time has but one dimension – the present.” (Moreno, 1985, 67). Psychodrama involves people who have been frustrated in life being able to satisfy act hungers in the here and now and regain their spontaneity. Indeed Moreno invented psychodrama in order to offer people who, within the limits of ‘social reality’ and cultural life, found they were forbidden or unable to complete certain acts essential to their psychological well being, a permission-giving space, a ‘surplus reality’, where they could fulfil an act hunger and thus achieve catharsis.

Blatner defined act hunger thus:

“This refers to the inner need, conscious or unconscious, to experience some dimension of emotion or physical action by actually enacting a situation where such self-expression would be part of appropriate role behaviour. For example, the need to be triumphant might evoke a scene of being a knight in combat.” (Blatner, 1988, 159)

“Act hunger is the drive toward a fulfilment of the desires and impulses at the core of the self. The director should help the protagonist in a symbolic fulfilment of his act hunger.” (Blatner, 1973, 68)

This suggests three further terms: act completion or act fulfilment as the satisfaction of an act hunger; another term for this is act gratification.

Karp (1994, 57) stated: “The desire of most people in psychodrama is to complete an act that has not been completed in life. The completion of this act may validate the protagonist’s emotional experience and sense of active choice.” (see also Goldman & Morrison, 1984, 107) Blatner, (1988, 158) suggested that “a traumatic or disappointing scene from childhood might be replayed with the elements changed: a co-therapist or another group member takes the role of a ‘perfect’ parent or teacher. This technique offers a more direct mode for what Franz Alexander called the ‘corrective emotional experience’ without having the therapist get involved directly in gratifying the patient’s needs.” The act hungers of abuse survivors, for example, “may include a need to create a sense of safety, a wish to tell about the abuse experience, or any desire to act in a way that alleviates emotional discomfort. When an act hunger is repeatedly unfulfilled, the result is an internalised system of complex emotions coalescing around the frustrated act hungers… Anyone who has worked with survivors of repeated abuse knows the extent to which frustrated act hungers… limit spontaneity and inhibit potential for emotional growth and development.” (Altman, 2000, 179) In psychodrama these act hungers can be fulfilled. Zerka Moreno (1966, 2) insisted that the protagonist be given “the satisfaction of act completion first, before
considering re-training for behaviour changes.” In this she is pointing to the possibility that a protagonist may need to learn how to fulfil the act hunger that has so long been denied. For example, if a protagonist finally is able, in a surplus reality scene, to tell her dead mother how angry she is with her, she may, before the end of the psychodrama, practice by going round the members of the group telling each person something else she is angry about, or rehearse a future scene in which she is able to complete an act hunger and so tell a friend she is angry with him. In other words, completing/fulfilling act hungers is empowering. Such completion is cathartic, satisfying, brings surprise, relief, release of tension.

In grief work, unfinished business can be seen as unfulfilled act hungers. Blatner suggested deathbed scenes, which focus the needs of the protagonist with a literal deadline for action. “You have five minutes to talk to him before he dies. Now is the time to make your goodbyes, ask your final questions, express your honest resentments and appreciations.” (Blatner 1973, 70)

In sociodrama (the action group method which focuses on whole group issues rather than an individual protagonist) the director also takes notice of group members’ act hungers:

“Through the process of warm-up, it becomes clear that group members share some act hungers. In the course of the sociodrama, the director performs interventions that give participants the opportunity to satisfy them. It is important to note, however, that in sociodrama the act hungers are resolved through the medium of hypothetical situations, not the members’ personal situations.” (Sternberg & Garcia, 1989, 39)

Act hungers therefore may be satisfied both by direct enactments and by fantasy, surplus reality, scenes. Life denies us many opportunities for fulfilment: drama sets no such limits as we can travel to distant galaxies, grow to ten feet tall, speak to the dead or rescue the vulnerable child. In fulfilling our act hungers we are able to move on to other activities, free and satisfied.

© Dr. John Casson, 2005

References:

Blatner, H. A. (1973) Acting-In, New York, Springer


