Evolution and Transformation of Open Sessions in Psychodrama: A Survey

Jacob Gershoni

Abstract

Among various schools of psychotherapy, open sessions are unique to psychodrama. This article describes this phenomenon from its inception in Vienna, the transformation from sociodrama to psychodrama and its global reach. It is generally accepted that the best way to introduce psychodrama is by experiential demonstrations. In its purest form this is a co-creative method that involves the director, the participants in the enactment and the audience. The development and proliferation of open sessions represent this co-creation, as surveyed here, in addressing community needs and giving them expression commensurate with directors’ personal interests and training. Issues related to safety and confidentiality are discussed.

Key words open sessions, sociodrama, psychodrama, impromptu theatre, confidentiality

While psychodrama is most often used as a form of group psychotherapy, J. L. Moreno believed that it should also be made available to the general public in order to benefit people who were not psychotherapy clients. Such people might wish to experience the psychodramatic method for educational purposes or for personal growth or for increased emotional fulfilment. In order to provide them with this opportunity, Moreno conducted open sessions on weekends from the 1940’s through the 1960’s in his New York City studio. Later, these open sessions were directed by his wife, Zerka or one of their advanced students.

The origin of open sessions may be traced back to psychodrama’s inception. When Moreno was a student in Vienna, he began experimenting with ideas that challenged the then current axioms about healing, mental health and self-development (Marineau, 1989). These unconventional ideas formed the basis of his new psychotherapeutic method. The arenas where healing and growth could take place, Moreno contended, were everywhere. Mental health could be achieved not only in the analyst’s office, but in the city park, in schools, in the theatre, in fact all over the community. Moreover, therapy need not take place in a one-to-one setting. Therapeutic interventions could take place in the presence of others.
Hare and Hare (1996) describe Moreno’s wish to revolutionize traditional theatre:

One day in 1911 he entered a theater with a friend when the play being presented was “Thus Spake Zarathustra,” based on Nietzsche’s book of that name. Moreno stopped the actor who was playing the role and objected that nobody but Zarathustra himself could play the role. The director of the play and the author came to the defense of the actor. Moreno then announced that they were witnessing the end of traditional theater and that the time was ripe for the birth of the only real theater in which every actor would play him or herself and not a role.

Hare and Hare (1996, p.7)

As Moreno continued to develop his ideas on, what later became known as the “triadic system” of sociometry, psychodrama and group psychotherapy (Gershoni, 2003), he rented a space in Vienna in which a group of actors co-created improvised plays with the audience. These improvised plays dealt with group or community themes based on everyday events. “The Living Newspaper”, as these presentations came to be called, gained popularity in the early 1920's; audiences learned to become involved in their enactments in the Theater of Spontaneity, (Stegreiftheater) (Moreno, 1973).

In 1925, an incident took place at the Living Newspaper which led to a major transformation in therapeutic theatre. Barbara, an actress in the Impromptu Theatre group, typically played sweet and romantic, docile roles. One night her husband, George, approached Moreno and voiced his disdain for his wife’s portrayal of roles that were contrary to her often angry and aggressive behaviours at home. Moreno responded by inviting both George and Barbara to play themselves, enacting scenes which portrayed the true nature of their interactions off stage, with all their raw, rageful emotions and conflicts. This incident, known in the history of psychodrama as “the Barbara and George incident,” marked the beginning of the use of current psychodramatic techniques. This first psychodrama was followed by the enactment of scenes from their childhoods, as well as of dreams and plans for the future.

In periodic follow-up meetings, Moreno surveyed their progress during sessions in which there was an audience. Thus the method evolved from sociodrama which focuses on group issues to psychodrama in which the protagonists enact scenes from their own lives with the help of a director and auxiliaries (Sternberg & Garcia, 2000). The method was
further developed and elaborated through open sessions. Open sessions remain the most effective instrument for introducing psychodrama to the public. Mental health professionals could also become familiar with psychodrama; some adopted its techniques while others became critical and alienated from it (Blatner, 2000; Gershoni, 2009).

After Moreno immigrated to the United States he regularly held open sessions in a small theatre of Carnegie Hall in New York City. His wish was to establish a space where people could share their issues and struggles in action; a process which he saw as healing not only for the protagonist, but for the auxiliaries and the audience as well. These original sessions were open to anyone interested in the method and in personal growth. Psychotherapists trained in other schools who wished to learn about psychodrama attended as well. There were no predetermined topics. The sessions were directed by Moreno together with Zerka. Later Moreno and Zerka purchased a building on the Upper West Side which they used for open sessions. These served as both a platform for the public and a training forum for students. In the 1960’s, Robert Siroka was one of the group leaders trained by Moreno to lead open sessions held at the Moreno Center in New York City. They had a routine schedule: Moreno and Zerka directed on Fridays, Jim Sacks on Saturdays, Marcia Karp on Tuesdays, Bob Siroka on Wednesdays and Hanna Weiner on Thursdays. The number of participants varied from a few to 120. Once a month, they directed a “Mystery Bus Ride” which both students and their supervisors attended. The bus riders had no idea whether they were headed to a training session, a dinner, a show, or somewhere else.

The current most notable institutes in the U.S. where open sessions are held are:

- The Sociometric Institute in New York City (directors: Bob and Jacqueline Siroka);
- The Hudson Valley Psychodrama Institute in New Paltz (directors: Rebecca Walters and Judy Swallow);
- The Psychodrama Training Institute in Chicago (directors: Elaine Sachnoff and Lorelei Goldman).

The Siroka’s have held open sessions continuously as part of the Sociometric Institute’s training and therapy programs. These are monthly full day sessions taking place on Saturdays and are open to
clients, trainees and the public at large. Most recently, the all day sessions have been conducted by trainees of the Siroka's: Louise Lipman, Nan Nally-Seif and Jacob Gershoni, all of whom are certified as trainers, educators and practitioners (TEP), the highest certification in psychodrama. Shorter sessions without a pre-announced topic are held monthly on Friday nights; these are directed by TEPs or Certified Practitioners who are training for the TEP certification in the presence of a supervisor. The Chicago Institute has held sessions since 1988 that are now directed by trainees, with a supervisor present. The Hudson Valley Chapter of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama (ASGPP) has held open sessions monthly since 1985 in Boughton Place, which houses the original Moreno Psychodrama Stage. These sessions are lead by CPs or TEPs only.

**Special Issues**

Directing a psychodrama session, whether as a group therapy or for training purposes, poses multiple challenges. If the underlying goal of psychodrama is to help people become more spontaneous and creative, the director is expected to be well versed in the method and to be the most spontaneous one in the room. It is the director’s responsibility to warm the group up, i.e. lead it to a level of safety and comfort necessary to proceed into action. There are many different techniques that may be used during the warm-up phase as well as various ways to select a protagonist. Concretizing the drama, setting the scene(s), choosing auxiliaries and directing the drama are all the responsibilities of the director. Should the focus be interpersonal, intra-psychic, or both? If both, in what order? There are many junctures for making choices during the session, which includes the sharing and closure phases as well as the enactment phase. In conducting open sessions, the challenges are even greater, for as anyone can attend, the unanticipated variables become multiplied.

Recently there have been online discussions among some of the most visible directors of open sessions about some of the prevalent issues which arise in directing them. Ethical dilemmas, safety, confidentiality, selection of protagonist, dealing with troubled or needy group members, the qualifications of the directors, are some of the most frequently raised issues. Some directors believe that open sessions are appropriate for sociodramas only and that the stakes and risks are too high for delving into personal issues in the presence of strangers. Others limit psychodramas to “relatively safe” issues, citing problems with safety, confidentiality and professional boundaries.
Over the years, there have been many changes to the ways in which professional and ethical issues are addressed while directing open sessions (J. D. Moreno, 1994). Below is an informal survey of the attitudes of some centre directors. It is based on direct communication as well as statements made on the Grouptalk listserve over a span of several years, and is by no means exhaustive. The results are presented using respondents’ geographical context.

**Chicago, Illinois, USA**

Elaine Sachnoff, the co-director with Lorelei Goldman, wrote that the open sessions at the Psychodrama Training Institute in Chicago evolved as a way for the students in its training program to broaden their experiences in directing. Beyond directing each other in their own training groups, conducting open sessions enriches their skills by providing them the opportunity to practice with a wider circle. Most of their trainees have clinical degrees and experience. They advertise open sessions in community papers and participants range from college students to homeless people to residents of half-way houses to, occasionally, lawyers, teachers and business managers. The trainees may participate as protagonists when they feel the need to, as may the trainers. A supervisor-TEP is always present to intervene and provide assistance if necessary, but this has seldom occurred. The open sessions are held three times a month and have a revolving leadership: one student will give a brief lecture and lead the processing afterwards; she or he will be the director the following week. The director conducts the warm-up, the drama, and the sharing and derolling afterwards.

The goal is to provide a place in Chicago where one can see a complete demonstration of a classical psychodrama and use as many of the techniques as are appropriate for the specific enactment. A rule of safety is spelled out: “no hitting people, no throwing furniture, hurting yourself or others.” When needed, they use a bataka (foam bat) on furniture, not on auxiliaries. In the early days of the institute, the directors dealt with the issue of confidentiality by requiring participants to sign a release stating that the attendees were personally responsible, and that the institute could not be held liable for any breach of confidentiality. This practice was discontinued when they learned that one cannot legally sign away one’s own rights. Now, as well as getting attendees’ verbal commitment to maintain confidentiality, they also emphasize the importance of the “contract” spelled out between the director and the protagonist, which stipulates the general direction the drama is to take (Sachnoff, 1985). However, as one cannot always
predict what way a drama may go, and what new information might emerge, the directors make sure to check with the protagonist by pointing out new possibilities and get his or her permission to change direction if necessary.

During the closure phase, careful attention is paid to ensure the re-integration of the protagonist to the group and to the ‘here and now’. If a core issue was dealt with and nobody knows the protagonist, they try to ascertain the support system outside of the institute available to him or her. While no specific issue or topic is excluded, they are very cautious when dealing with traumas related to incest or molestation.

**Hudson Valley, New York**

The Hudson Valley Chapter (HVC) of the ASGPP views its mission and the goals of the open sessions differently. After some years of holding these sessions, when attendance was down the directors and members of the community held a meeting and talked about Moreno’s vision. They realized that there needs to be a place for people whose interests lay more with healing social wounds than with personal work, or those whose commitment precludes being part of an ongoing group. There was also a group of people who attended regularly and who would have been quite dismayed if the sessions were eliminated. As a result of the meeting, the chapter leaders rallied and forged ahead with better publicity and a stronger outreach campaign. At the same time, they continued the tradition of monthly open sessions. They have had many presenters from their own community and as well as others who have travelled to New Paltz to lead sessions. The proximity to New York City made it possible for visiting presenters to be involved in this initiative, and the roster includes some of the best known psychodramatists in the country: Zerka Moreno, Jonathan Fox, Peter Pitzele, Ann Hale, Claire Danielson, and Nan Nally-Seif among others. The presenters usually decide on the topic, which is either of interest to them or their specialty, and consequently the sessions vary from sociodrama to playback to psychodrama. Since their goals are more toward community healing rather than personal growth or psychodramatist training, they follow different guidelines than the Chicago Institute. The open sessions offer a way to showcase the method to professionals and graduate students from local universities.

Rebecca Walters wrote about an HVC sociodrama that took place after the 9/11 attack on the twin towers in New York City. This was a powerful session that facilitated the expression of much the pent-up tension, deep
anger and sorrow; this brought the community together in a place of hope. Sociodrama seems to be a natural and indisputable tool for working on community issues.

When psychodrama is conducted at HVC, it is with the expressed idea of providing a demonstration session, in order to allow people to learn and experience psychodrama. It is a place where potential clients come to find out if this method is right for them and where students from the graduate programs in counselling and social work come to experience the method rather than merely read about it. Although HVPI has a training program, the trainees do not lead open sessions. Only certified psychodramatists (CPs or TEPs) lead them; this decision stems from ethical concerns. These same ethical concerns prompted the directors to devise elaborate and clear guidelines for the presenters of psychodramas. They recommend that the director of the session “do a little sociometry to figure out who knows whom and if there are sub groups” and pay attention to individuals who do not know anyone else.

The guidelines spell out how to conduct the warm-up and the action: “Keep your warm-up focused on the here and now, or on the future. Do not go into early childhood stuff. Otherwise someone may get picked up who wants to work on trauma. Open sessions are neither the time nor the place to do so”. The theme of the open sessions is advertised in advance and is usually related to present or future situations rather than past hurts. The directors view this policy as strength building and community building. Recent themes: Spring Cleaning, Mid-Summer Magic and Ghouls and Goblins (the latter just before Halloween).

New York, NY
Robert Siroka was trained by Moreno and founded the Sociometric Institute and the Psychodrama Training Institute in 1965. These have evolved into a major centre for therapy and training that emphasizes the interconnectedness of psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy. In a unique way, some of Siroka’s training groups included people who were not mental health professionals but attended because of their interest in the methods and in personal growth. Group members of both therapy and training groups were also invited to attend monthly all-day sessions on various topics. A core community developed in these open workshops, consisting of individuals who were both well versed in psychodrama and intensely interested in the depth of this work. The Saturday workshops were also open to the community at large and in this respect served as open sessions. The number of
participants varied, but on most occasions ranged from 20 to 40 attendees. They set very few rules: confidentiality and no violence. Batakas were used on furniture or pillows. General topics were announced for each Saturday workshop and dealt with issues from the past, present and future; directors do not recall any sessions going awry.

According to Siroka, problems in open sessions are avoided by the sociometric selection of the protagonist. In most cases, after the warm-up, participants are asked who wants to work and the group chooses the protagonist from among the volunteers. This sociometric structure provides a degree of safety and support for delving into the drama. Siroka views open sessions as psychodrama demonstrations, not intended to be psychotherapy but rather to be educational. He stresses that educational experiences can be as deep as psychotherapy and that individual revelations and risk taking only serve to deepen them. A verbal statement to this effect and a statement about confidentiality is usually made at the beginning of sessions.

**The Caron Institute, New York**

The Caron foundation is a centre for drug and alcohol treatment. Its main campus is in Wernersville, Pennsylvania and it has offices in several major US cities. Psychodrama is an important part of the treatment offered both during the inpatient phase and in the aftercare. Tian Dayton, PhD, TEP heads the psychodrama program and has presided over the open sessions that are held monthly in their New York office. The directors of the open sessions are certified psychodramatists and people who have been through Caron programs and are part of the addictions field, in some way, who have psychodrama training.

Attendees tend to be Caron graduates and others in their networks, but also trainees interested in addiction treatment and psychodrama who may need training credit hours. There is a $20.00 fee at the door. Like Bob Siroka, her trainer in psychodrama, Tian Dayton has similar rules of confidentiality, no violence or disruption and respect for others. These open sessions are publicized through the Caron network and is on their calendar which is mailed to graduates and to professionals in the community. In addition to the session’s director there is also a staff person at the door to ensure safety. If someone is inappropriate they would be discouraged from attending, but as she notes there has not been problems of this nature: “we are in an addictions network so people are already used to twelve steps rules and guidelines…”
The United Kingdom
Marcia Karp is one of the students of Moreno credited with bringing psychodrama to Europe; while in training with Moreno, she directed open sessions of the psychodrama theatre in New York City from 1965-1968. Before being assigned her own evening, initially she was a “floater” substituting for other directors in their absence. One memorable evening was when she had to fill in for Moreno himself at a time when over one hundred people attended, with the expressed purpose of seeing him. At first she was anxious, almost apologetic to the audience, but then she rose to the occasion and held her own. “This prepared me to be ready for almost anything and direct in the oddest of circumstances,” Karp recalls. In 1973, she emigrated to the United Kingdom, where she established the Holwell International Psychodrama Centre and was its co-director for the next 25 years. The purposes of the centre were training and therapy; no open sessions were held because of its location in the countryside.

The first open session in England was directed by Moreno in 1951 at the Maudsley Hospital, when he visited in Hampstead. Recently, after Ms. Karp moved to London, efforts to bring open sessions to the capital began in earnest. On May 17, 2007 she directed an open session; since then, she and her colleagues have offered on a monthly basis with different directors rotating. Adhering to her earlier training, she lays down very few ground rules, other than dealing with confidentiality and safety. The first session was held at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, known for training famous actors; the event was publicized and 55 persons attended the first meeting, which lasted two hours. About half of the audience had never heard of psychodrama before. One young man, who attended, 25 year old Jackson Sprague, commented on his experience: “I forgot how delightful it is to talk to strangers in a meaningful way.”

Sessions are now held at the Lancaster Gate Hotel in central London.

Melbourne, Australia
The Moreno Psychodrama Society and the Psychodrama Institute of Melbourne jointly host monthly open sessions in their Theatre of Spontaneity; this theatre began in 2006. Sue Daniel the director of the Melbourne Institute describes the sessions thus:

During a Theatre of Spontaneity we depict events psychodramatically, use techniques such as the living
newspaper, the magic shop, the magic box, as well as doubling, mirroring and role reversal. We sculpture moments from the day or week or month that have been special, significant or intriguing, conduct sociodramas on everyday situations and use sociometry to explore situations in our social networks. These are three hour sessions that include a break for supper.

The directors of the open sessions are accredited psychodramatists on the whole, but sometimes advanced trainees direct while their trainers are present.

Again Sue Daniel:

A theme may not be chosen beforehand, it may emerge spontaneously from the group, although some of the producers may come up with a theme beforehand. They have explored many things, for example, the river systems and weather, gardens and families and the Tower of Babel, and even done some graphing in action. I have noticed that those who come regularly, who don’t belong to any training program or personal development program, have expanded their role repertoire, developed relationships and have become more confident. I think I can safely say we all gain a greater perspective on our world and our relationships to it and each other.

Attendance has ranged from a minimum of 8 to 40 people, with an average of 15 attendees.

As to ground rules, they follow sociometric principles, with spontaneity and creativity as guidelines. The events are publicized through their blog or their website; members and students put up flyers in their places of work and study. Ms. Daniel does not recall any session going awry. She says:

Spontaneity works well. Sociometry works well; taking care to encounter people, meet them, warm up to them, and develop relationships with them as they arrive. We consider the make-up of each group. We would block any inappropriate response if there were one. We take care to reframe things by mirroring people, and we work with the adequate responses of our
audience. We haven’t had any problems. Firm and gentle leadership works well.

**Sydney, Australia**

The Sydney affiliate of the Australia and New Zealand Psychodrama Association has offered open sessions since 2003 as a way of marketing and letting people experience psychodrama. The sessions are held on the first Friday of every month and last 2.5 hours. Until recently they have been directed by certified psychodramatists (e.g. Kate Hill and Rollo Browne), but now they are also directed by advanced trainees with their supervisor present. These students must have at least 600 hours of training and have completed their first paper, which is required for certification.

The number of participants varies from 3 to 15 and usually they are a combination of new, returns and trainees. These sessions are free. They have no ground rules for inclusion in the session but participants are asked to call beforehand; this is viewed as a vetting process. The sessions start by outlining the five elements of psychodrama and the three segments of the session: warm-up, enactment and sharing. After the session there is time for questions about the process, training and other groups. The publicity for these events is done primarily through emailing to interested persons in advance of each session; often participants bring friends. The directors deal with safety issues as they would in presentations of workshops in conferences with explanation about confidentiality and to date there have not had any session go awry.

**South America**

Dalmiro Bustos, a psychiatrist trained by Moreno, with practices in Argentina and Brazil, reports that at the start of psychodrama in Argentina, there were open sessions. At present there are none on a regular basis with the exception of training sessions in certain institutes. It seems that the trend is toward sociodrama in sessions open to the public.

A significant event occurred on October 12, 2002 when more than 200 psychodramatists did open sociodramas simultaneously in different places such as public buildings, schools, squares and clubs. Monica Zuretti, another psychiatrist and psychodramatist, confirms that it was initiated in Buenos Aires and took place in 12 other countries as well. This great experience was published in Spanish by the Universidad
Nacional de Mexico, and compiled by Mexican Psychodramatist Maria Carmen Bello (2004). Since then similar events were organized as opportunities arose. In Argentina, they are transforming their societies of psychodrama into a sociometric network by meeting monthly to get to know each other through psychodrama.

Brazil has several permanent places where public psychodrama takes place. One is at the psychiatrist Jose Fonseca’s Institute in Sao Paulo, where sessions are held monthly. Others, such as Dr. Bustos’, are held randomly, sometimes monthly, sometimes every two or three months. Students do not direct open sessions; they are only run by experienced directors. Some are open to the public without exceptions, Moreno style. Attendance at these sessions usually ranges from 20 to around 70, occasionally more. They typically are on general sociodramatic subjects. Sessions are advertised through mailshots and on the internet.

**Istanbul, Turkey**

Deniz Altinay, co-director of the Istanbul Psychodrama Institute (IPI) named after Zerka Moreno, started directing open sessions in the Turkish capital, Ankara, in 1995. Seven years later, he brought this tradition to IPI, which he runs jointly with Nese Karabekir. More recently, some of their graduates have begun directing.

At IPI, open sessions are held once every two months and are open to everyone. Most of those who attend are lay people, but some professionals who are not trained psychodramatists also attend. There are no ground rules. Sessions are announced on their website.

**Tel Aviv, Israel**

Oded Nave’, founder and director of the Kivunim Institute for Psychodrama and Group Work and the School for Analytic Psychodrama, started directing open sessions there in 1993. Nave’ studied psychodrama at Lesley College in Boston in the mid 80s, where he observed and participated under the direction of his instructor, the late Peter Rowan. The first open session served as a model for a tradition, now at its 16th year, at the Kivunim Institute and the School for Analytic Psychodrama; the open sessions are held monthly. Gradually they evolved with the aim of widening public interest in psychodrama.

Most sessions are directed by Nave’ and, occasionally, by staff members and faculty of the School; they believe that an experienced teacher and
therapist should be directing such events. Early registration is required; on average there are about 15 to 20 participants for each open session. The Institute has ongoing advertisements on the internet, in the print media, flyers and newsletters; clients of the Institute also spread the word.

A typical session begins with a short introduction of the participants and a discussion of participants’ notions about psychodrama. During this discussion, the attendees’ expectations are revealed and explored. Nave’ writes, “If during the session, there are particular limitations we want to convey in terms of physical safety, confidentiality and so on, we say it as needed. We have never had any serious difficulties since we began.”

Nave’ is aware of some practitioners’ reluctance to have the open sessions. He says, “In my experience, they cause no harm, they are exciting, informative and challenging in many ways.”

Aotearoa, New Zealand

For approximately twenty years Peter Parkinson and his colleagues have run open sessions weekly on Thursday nights. The sessions have been an integral part of Dr. Parkinson’s general medical practice. At times, there have been more sessions during the week conducted by Dr. John Burton and Noel Bors. Dr. Parkinson has been able to obtain governmental funding for these sessions, and therefore, they have been made accessible to all, free of charge. He writes:

People could come when they wanted. There was a natural sociometric process that took place with group attendees in that they formed surrogate whanaus (Maori for extended family). I or one of my team would be invited to supervise the functioning of such a whanaus from time to time. These formed an invaluable community support system that meant that residential care for mental health purposes was almost never necessary. Often a newcomer to the group would be invited into whanaus and receive an educated human commitment from them, and later be in the position to also contribute. Some of the most magical stories emanated from the whanaus. the community aspect and the availability of professional support by myself or staff were essential to the safety of the open group.
Each open session would have up to 30 participants though sometimes during holiday times there would be only one. The only ground rule was no drugs or alcohol. The whanaus became the natural place to deal with problem behaviour in these sessions. Parkinson reports that in the 20 years they had one problem when a member came in drunk. He then drew a knife at Parkinson, but after a tense twenty minutes of talking to him he relinquished the knife and the group proceeded.

These unique open sessions are similar to the House of Encounter that Moreno established with fellow students in Vienna (Marineau, 1989), which offered a place for people who were refugees or displaced and formed a supportive community. Psychodrama was used to enact their stories and strengthen the bond between the group members. It provided opportunities for problem solving and information sharing. Sadly, when government funding dried up the program stopped.

**The Personal Experience of the Directors**

In the biography *Jacob Levi Moreno*, the author, Rene Marineau, explores Moreno’s motivation for creating action methods that could heal society’s ills and help individuals live spontaneous and creative lives:

Why did Moreno choose expressive methods to promote individual or group fulfillment? The answer lies in Moreno’s own personality. It is as if we were to ask the same question about Freud. Psychoanalysis was created by someone at ease with dream analysis, and curious about the meaning of his own unconscious. Moreno was to create a theatre and later a therapeutic method to justify his personal desire to play God. He was even to say that thanks to psychodrama he was able to master his own megalomania. Reference to his own experience led him to believe that everyone enjoys a ‘normal’ desire to be centre stage and that in order to attain full psychological development, to be creative, everyone has to find a way to perform spontaneously in front of an audience.”

Marineau (1989 p.122)

This desire led Moreno to develop the techniques of Impromptu Theater, which eventually evolved into psychodrama through the use of open sessions in Vienna and the USA.

It can be deduced that the various approaches to open sessions are also related to the personal experience and training of the leaders who created such forums in their communities. Elaine Sachnoff recalled that
in 1965, leading open sessions in New York was a requirement for graduating from Moreno's training program. She directed these sessions under the supervision of Moreno and other senior trainers. When she started her own training program in Chicago, it was natural for her to have students lead these sessions in ways that reflected her own training.

The open sessions at HVC were initiated mid-1980 by Elise Gold, a certified psychodramatist in New Paltz, New York; the first session was conducted by Zerka Moreno. Rebecca Walters, who later became the co-director, followed this lead and invited others to direct the monthly sessions. Their experiences led them to the decision not to do trauma work or dramas related to early abuse. Because each session is only two hours long and is held with people who don't necessarily know each other, their guidelines are to "keep it simple and not to go deep."

Bob Siroka's training has included interweaving psychodrama and sociometry and working with large and varied groups. This training has led to his decision to conduct open workshops and open sessions with very few rules and with heavy reliance on sociometry. For over four decades, he has honed his craft, teaching sociometry and demonstrating its multiple uses in action as well as its uses in the realms of social and theoretical research.

Anne Hale, one of the most prominent figures in the psychodrama community and an expert on sociometry, commented in the Grouptalk discussion (Nov. 10, 2002):

We open ourselves up to risk every time we work as psychodramatists, regardless of setting. We have learned over the years ways to minimize those risks and benefit the overall safety of participants. Exactly what each of us does may vary depending on our comfort level, familiarity with the setting, the audience, etc. Where there is a history of open demonstration sessions, there is often a loosely formed, yet often reliable core group of participants. They are vested in the group's survival as they find satisfaction and connection there. They often bring their own acquaintances and want them to have a successful experience. This helps the safety factor. Still you have no control over promises of confidentiality, over individual projective processes to which they relinquish their projection after the session, and what
people will do with their experiences after they leave...[...]
Moreno told me (1972) that the main attribute of a good psychodramatist was courage. The training I like is training which nurtures that courage and provides a venue where it can get a workout.

Summary
The evolution and transformation of open sessions follows the path that Moreno viewed as vital in human life and human communities: creativity. Facilitated and propelled by spontaneity, creativity leads to the creation of “cultural conserves” (Moreno, 1993, 1953, 1934) which are the “product” of the creative effort. Cultural conserves, however, are not static as they perpetually trigger further creations and give rise to more Promethean processes. The open sessions that initially drew from cultural conserves (e.g. Greek theatre, ancient healing rituals) that were enactments of group and communal issues (sociodrama) evolved into dramatic work on personal issues (psychodrama). The new conserves are interpreted and explored by many other practitioners in various parts of the world in the form of open sessions that vary according to the leaders training and experience and their communities’ needs.

References


**About the author**

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