

# On dramatic reality and its therapeutic function in drama therapy

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## Abstract

Dramatic reality is a core concept in drama therapy, and perhaps also the most genuine feature of the field. All drama therapists draw on dramatic reality in some form, both in their clinical practice and in their theoretical thinking. This paper explores the concept of dramatic reality in drama therapy from a philosophical angle, in a way that is unattached to a particular model or a specific approach: first, the article defines the concept's scope and boundaries, with reference to its modes as informed by Schechner's notion of *performance activities*; then it describes the main features and properties of dramatic reality, while looking at their implications in a therapeutic setting. Finally, it points out the four main tasks that drama therapists are called on to perform in connection with dramatic reality.

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## Introduction

As a drama therapy teacher and supervisor I'm often asked questions, such as: when does the therapy *really* occur in drama therapy? Is it in the verbal processing that follows the enactment? Is it possible to do drama therapy without acting? What about without working on roles? Do I have to use tales, plays, or projective tools or can I work directly on the client's personal story? Can playing chess with a client be thought of as doing drama therapy? What about basketball? My answer to these questions is essentially linked to the presence and form of dramatic reality in the therapeutic interaction: as long as we and our clients are involved in dramatic reality, we are doing drama therapy.

Dramatic reality is a core concept in drama therapy and perhaps its most genuine feature. Many writers – both drama therapists and theorists from related fields – refer to a category of experience that is unique to dramatic interaction, which involves a tangible entrance into an imaginary realm, engaging in make-believe play, in *as if* behavior, etc. Compared to verbal psychotherapy, where interventions are made primarily in the actual situation (or via the transference process) through the therapeutic relationship, in drama therapy interventions are made mainly within or through dramatic reality. Although there are probably as many ways of doing drama therapy as there are practitioners in the field, all drama therapists engage in dramatic reality in their work. The drama therapy journey invariably entails some form of contact with this category of experience, whether it is through roles (Landy, 1993, 2000, 2001), improvised transformations (Johnson, 2000), scene work and dramatized personal stories (Emunah, 1993, 1994), plays, tales, or myths (Gersie, 1997; Jenkyns, 1996; Jennings & Minde, 1993; Jennings, 1998), ritual structures (Grainger, 1990; Jennings, 1994; Mitchel, 1994; Snow, 2000), or projective tools.

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The expression *dramatic reality* has been employed by many drama therapists (Duggan & Grainger, 1997; Jennings, 1998). However, as I have stated in a previous article in this journal (Pendzik, 2003), the notion has been called various names, both in drama therapy and in related fields: Early in the 1950s Moreno coined the term *surplus reality* to indicate a level where reality can be simulated through drama, so as to include “the intangible, invisible dimensions of intra- and extrapsychic life” (1987, p. 7). Johnson (1991) speaks of the *playspace*, which he defines as “an enhanced space where the imagination infuses the ordinary” (p. 289). Lahad (2000) refers to *fantastic reality* as a realm “where time and space are suspended and where the impossible is made possible” (p. 16). Courtney (in Cattanach, 1994a) speaks of the *fictional present*, as a reality that is both present and past, real and symbolic. Blatner and Blatner (1988) suggest the term “liminal field” to represent the dimension in which objective and subjective reality meet, where the mind “is inextricably interactive with matter” (p. 58). The notion is akin to Winnicott’s (1971) idea of the *potential space* – an *intermediate zone* that lies between behavior and contemplation, between *me* and *not me*, and that is the natural site of play. From the theatre side, dramatic reality is informed by Stanislavki’s (1936) concept of the *as if* – the conscious mechanism by which performers brings themselves into the realm of the imaginary. In Boal’s (1995) terms, the *aesthetic space* refers to “a space within a space, a superposition of spaces” (p. 18) in which the dramatic space takes up the subjective qualities of reality. Borrowing a theory from semantics, Elam (1980) speaks of *dramatic worlds* as *possible worlds*, as hypothetical constructs that are recognized as “counter-factual (i.e., non-real) states of affairs but are embodied *as if* in progress in the actual here and now” (p. 102).

In spite of the diversity of names ascribed to it, the idea is equivalent. More than expressing a discrepancy concerning the essence of the concept, these variations probably reflect different modes of approaching it. Thus, for instance, Johnson’s improvisational style emphasizes the *play* element; Lahad’s use of stories stresses the *fantastic* aspect, while Boal’s theatrical outlook calls attention to the *aesthetics*. In order to explore the concept in a way that is not attached to a particular orientation, I chose the term *dramatic reality*, as in my view it has a more generic connotation. Being a core aspect of drama therapy, the concept needs to be clarified independently of any particular style of working with it. This article attempts to define the concept of dramatic reality, and to explore its qualities, in order to reach a better understanding of how to use it as a therapeutic tool.

### Dramatic reality: definition and modes

Dramatic reality is imagination manifested. It is an *as if* made real, an island of imagination that becomes apparent in the midst of actual life. Dramatic reality involves a departure from ordinary life into a world that is both actual and hypothetical: it is the establishment of a *world within the world* (Fig. 1). Following Peter Brook’s (1981) definition of the stage as “a place where the invisible can appear” (p. 42), we might say that dramatic reality is what inhabits such a stage.

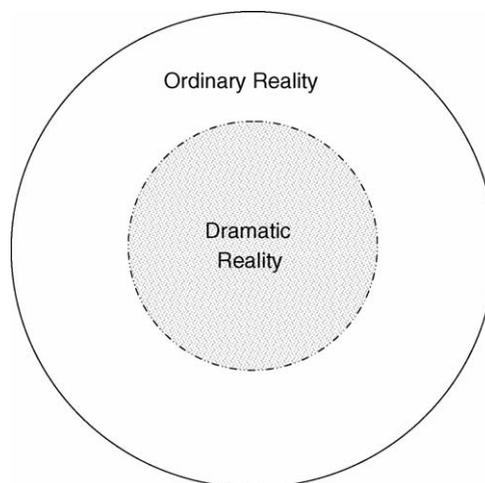


Fig. 1. Diagram of dramatic reality and ordinary reality.

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