

# The PSYCHOLOGY of ACTORS

by Prof. Francesco Gallo,  
MD, Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist

## ABSTRACT

The article examines some psychological aspects typically found in professional actors. It reports what was said about it by Ancient Greeks, William Shakespeare, Sigmund Freud, Luigi Pirandello, Otto Fenichel, Hanns Sachs and Abraham Arden Brill and what were the psychopathologies (depression, narcissism, anorexia nervosa etc.) that affected some entertainers, such as, Michael Jackson, Amy Jade Winehouse, Veronica Lake and Roby Williams. Finally, it illustrates why many of us wear masks and why we can all consider ourselves amateur "actors".

**KEY WORDS:** narcissism, masks, identification, projection, ego

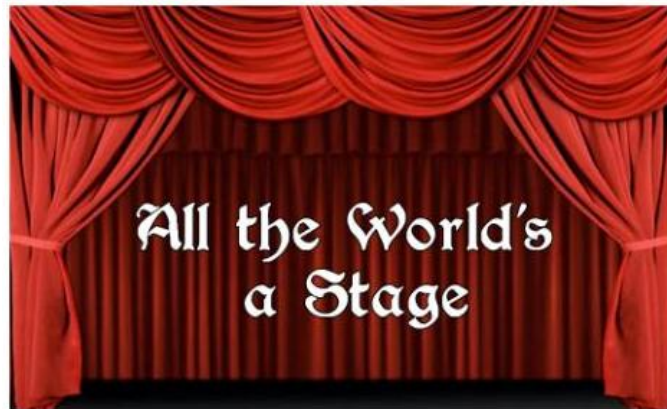
## RIASSUNTO

L'articolo prende in esame alcuni aspetti psicologici tipicamente riscontrati negli attori di professione. Riporta cosa dicevano in merito gli Antichi Greci, William Shakespeare, Sigmund Freud, Luigi Pirandello, Otto Fenichel, Hanns Sachs e Abraham Arden Brill e quale erano le psicopatologie (depressione, narcisismo, anoressia nervosa ecc.) che colpirono alcuni intrattenitori come Michael Jackson, Amy Jade Winehouse, Veronica Lake e Roby Williams. Infine, illustra che siccome siamo in molti ad indossare delle maschere, potremmo considerarci degli "attori" dilettanti.

**William Shakespeare** (1564-1616) in his pastoral comedy "**As You Like It**", in Act II Scene VII says:

" **All the world's a stage,**  
And **all the men and women merely players;**  
They have their **exits** and their **entrances,**  
And one man in his time plays **many parts,**  
His acts being **seven ages.** At first, the **infant,**  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.  
Then the whining **schoolboy,** with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the **lover,**  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a **soldier,**  
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the **justice,**  
In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part. The **sixth age** shifts  
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;

His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. **Last scene** of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.



The meaning of this scene is that this **world is like a stage show**, and **human beings** are **actors** who play their assigned roles every day during the seven stages of their lives. We enter this world through different routes (entrances), and exit in different ways. From the time we're born to when we die, we go through seven stages, similarly to different acts of a comedy, drama or play.

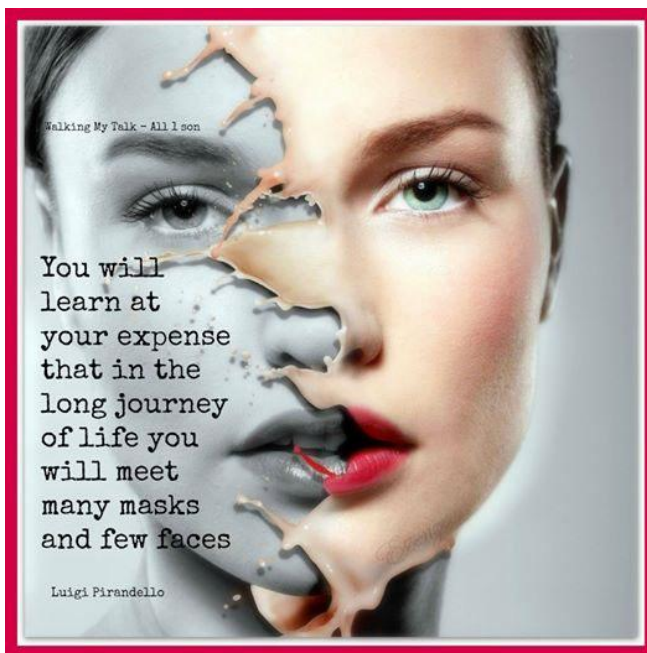
All **infants** are **narcissistic** and as they grow, their ego and super-ego start to develop. The environment contributes in the development of their personalities, for instance, how parents treat them affects how neuronal pathways are mapped and, hence, how they perceive reality. Dopamine plays an important role in behavior as well as mood, attention and learning.

We must realize the importance of acting in every day's living; teachers, preachers, salesmen, politicians, etc. must all be actors if they wish to convince students, church goers, clients or electors. Also, first impressions are important during job interviews or during our first encounter with our fiancée's parents.

By "**acting**" we mean anyone who "tries to be someone else" and thus we understand how **camouflage** can affect the world especially when we consider the fact that metaphorically speaking, **most of us wear masks** to try to hide our unaccepted faults. Nevertheless, "acting" does not "deceive" anyone but it puts us in the shoes of others. Intelligence and empathy are both required to express the lives and emotions of others.

The works of the Italian playwright, novelist, and critic **Luigi Pirandello** (1867-1936) describe the conflict between **essence** and **appearance**. Awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1934, most of his later works deal with his idea that **society forces us to wear a mask** if we wish to survive in an environment where transparency is not essential. He conceived the idea of a mask in his 1925 novel "*One, Nobody and 100.000*" where through the metaphor of the mask, he explained how **man hides his true personality and nature**. It depersonalizes his ego into multiple identities as it adapts to society. The person, therefore, is at the same time *one* for himself,

100.000 in relation to the various situations in which he finds himself, as a nobody because, due to different opinions, his true identity vanishes.



Pirandello wrote: "Inevitably we construct ourselves. Let me explain. I enter this house and immediately I become what I have to become, what I can become: I construct myself. That is, I present myself to you in a form suitable to the relationship I wish to achieve with you. And, of course, you do the same with me... the belief that we all, you see, think of ourselves as one single person: but it's not true: each of us is several different people, and all these people live inside us. With one person we seem like this and with another we seem very different. But we always have the illusion of being the same person for everybody and of always being the same person in everything we do."

The mask is worn to hide the entire face of a person, but it is also found in theatrical performances or in popular festivals. Thus, we can see the connection between Pirandello's ideas and acting.

When the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to him in 1934, the presentation speech pointed out that "*the most remarkable feature of Pirandello's art is his almost **magical power to turn psychological analysis into good theatre***". Pirandello knew the works of Freud and Jung, and he had a particular interest in the **subconscious** and its role in shaping a person's identity. One of the most important topics in his plays is **identity**. Pirandello uses the concept of "**naked masks**" to explain how we play a variety of roles in life (for example, father, husband, son, employee, student, and so forth), so that no two people see us alike; the naked mask is the human face, which conceals a person's true identity, rather than revealing it.

Two masks are associated with **Ancient Greek drama** with the smiling and frowning faces. They are the **Comedy and Tragedy masks** that were worn in ancient Greece during the Golden Age, around 500 – 300 BC, and are paired together to show the two extremes of the human psyche.



The **Comedy mask** is known as "**Thalia**" who in Greek mythology is the Muse of Comedy and Idyllic Poetry, portrayed as a happy, cheerful young woman crowned with ivy.



The Tragedy mask is known as "**Melpomene**" the Muse of Tragedy depicted with the tragedy mask in one hand, and a club in the other.

In Ancient Greece, all the actors were male, and they all played multiple roles. Masks were used to show the change in character or mood and they challenged the actors to portray their characters' feelings in a more artful way, by using their voice and body language, since the masks obviously hid facial expressions.

Before an actor can impersonate someone else, he must first **understand emotions** and psychology. He must have a good **memory** to learn scripts, a **flexible** personality and an **expressive** face.

Many directors don't expect actors to memorize the entire script. They usually allow them to be somewhat spontaneous by inserting their own words or expressions not specified in the script.

With a professional **audition**, capacity of actors is evaluated and if it is not acceptable, they are advised to attend "actors studios".

Actors stimulate in all of us subconscious **identifications** and **projections**, we identify ourselves with what they represent and portray and we project or attribute to them our undesirable feelings or emotions instead of accepting them or dealing with them. We project our most obscure drives to negative characters we see on the movie screen.

During the process of **identification**, the child adopts the characteristics of the same-sex parent and begins to associate themselves with and copy the behavior of significant others. Those who portray on stage traumatic life events that really occurred to them, risk to activate the post-traumatic stress syndrome.



When on November 14<sup>th</sup> 2015 **Gena Rowlands** (b.1930) received in Hollywood the Governors Award, she said:

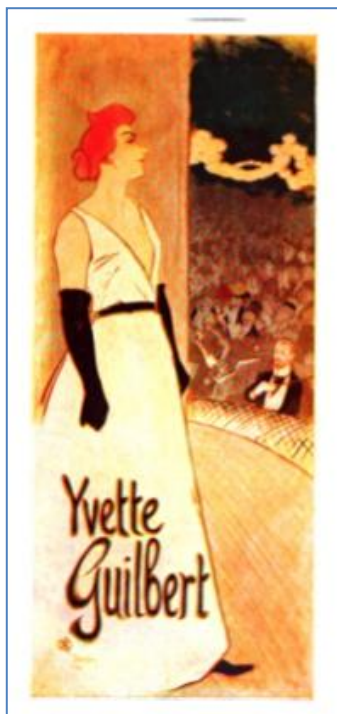
*"...You know what's wonderful about being an actress is that you don't live one life (yours), you live many lives and for that we have to thank the writers. After all they're the ones who start out with a piece of blank paper and they create the story and the characters in the story and that gives us actresses the opportunity to hopefully bring all these characters to life".*

**Otto Fenichel** (1897-1946) studied the unconscious psychological aspects of acting through which **exhibitionistic** and **narcissistic** tendencies are gratified by the audience. We must be careful in labeling people "**exhibitionists**", a definition which should be strictly reserved to those who are stimulated sexually by exposing their own genitals to others.

Moreover, the people in the audience should not be referred to as "**voyeurs**" unless they obtain sexual gratification in observing actors or actresses who are partly undressed, nude or engaged in sexual acts.

According to psychoanalyst **Hanns Sachs** (1881-1947) actors induce the public to participate in the forbidden acts and wishes he portrays on stage, thus, feeling less guilty when the audience approves them by applauding. However, at times, actors present on stage violent emotions feared by society and in fact **Cicero** (106-43 BC) saw actors as dangerous citizens who had to live in the outskirts of the city.

**Abraham Arden Brill** (1874 -1948) an Austrian-born psychiatrist, in his article "*Basic Principles of Psychoanalysis*", thought that actors are "*persons who have failed to fix their **libido** properly...their emotional transference is more or less inhibited*".<sup>1</sup>



**Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939) was very attracted by the cabaret singer and actress **Yvette Guilbert** (1865-1944). He never missed a show when she performed in Vienna and from 1926 to 1938, they wrote many letters to each other, exchanging views on the "**psychology of actors**".

Yvette believed that an actor's greatness is his/her ability of forget about his/her own personality and substitute it with that of the character he/she portrays. Freud replied that the actor's entire personality is not eliminated but only certain aspects of it, such as, suppressed desires that through acting, are expressed or manifested.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Arden Brill, "*Basic Principles of Psychoanalysis*", University Press of America, Lanham MD, 1985, p. 272

Sometimes actors in "**method acting**", purposely wish to evoke realistic emotions into their performance by concentrating on personal experiences. When these emotions on stage are not controlled, they can upset the mental state of performers and give rise to fear, fatigue, shame, insomnia and personality disorders. It depends if these past emotions, at times traumatic, were suppressed or are still very much alive. When observing the emotional effects of *method acting*, we must remember that many actors have had a traumatic life, that they do not accept themselves as they are and that acting gives them the chance to "change their nature".

In 1989, the English actor **Daniel Day-Lewis** (b.1957), left the National Theater production of "Hamlet," in which he played the title role, because of nervous exhaustion. Although he had performed the same role sixty-five times, he said: "It conjures up the demons in you".

Many actors, especially comedians, when they're on stage, hide their inner sadness and depression. For instance, the comedian **Robin Williams** (1951-2014), made us laugh but in 2014 his depression, alcohol and drug problems led him to commit suicide.

**Richard Burton** (1925-1984) an exceptional Shakespearean actor, suffered from cirrhosis of the liver from alcohol abuse and died of a brain hemorrhage in 1984 at 58 years of age.

Actress **Angelina Jolie** (b.1975) in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal Magazine* by Julia Reed in November 2015, admitted she was suffering from depression which she believes, can be partly attributed to her "unhealthy" hometown (Los Angeles) . She said: "*I was raised in a place where if you have fame and money and you're decent-looking and have the ability to work in this industry, you have everything in the world. Then you attain those things and realize you still couldn't be more empty. I didn't know where to put myself.*"<sup>2</sup>

The British actress **Catherine Zeta Jones** (b.1969) and American actor **Mel Gibson** (b.1956) are probably affected by the **manic-depressive** or bipolar syndrome, a mental illness characterized by mood swings between two extreme moods, mania and depression. This disorder associated with alcohol and substance abuse, affects approximately 1 to 2% of the population and 10- 15% of those affected, commit suicide (DSM-IV). Many scientific articles associate bipolar disorder with artistry and as claimed by a 2008 Stanford University School of Medicine study, those affected expressed more creativity than the general population.

U.S. model and actress **Brooke Shields** (b.1965) suffered from **postpartum psychosis** (also called puerperal psychosis or postnatal psychosis) which occurs in 1-2 women out of 1,000, and is associated with increased risk for suicide and infanticide.

It starts suddenly a few days or weeks after delivery with mood swings, sadness, confusion, hyperactivity, insomnia and even hallucinations and delusions.

It usually takes about 6 to 12 months to recover.

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Reed, "*The Examined Life of Angelina Jolie Pitt*", *Wall Street Journal Magazine*, New York City, November 4, 2015.

It coincides "... with tremendous hormonal shifts after delivery. The patient develops frank psychosis, cognitive impairment, and grossly disorganized behavior that represent a complete change from previous functioning. These perturbations, in combination with lapsed insight into her illness and symptoms, can lead to devastating consequences in which the safety and well-being of the affected mother and her offspring are jeopardized. ...The somatic therapies include antimanic agents, atypical antipsychotic medications, and ECT".<sup>3</sup>



**Veronica Lake** (1919-1973), a famous Hollywood actress of the 1940s, had a troubled childhood and experienced a decline as a result of alcoholism, hepatitis and mental illness (probably schizophrenia).

**Anorexia nervosa** is found especially among adolescent girls that participate in activities which emphasize weight or appearance, such as dance (especially ballet), sports, modeling and acting.



Stressful life events such as failure in school or in sports or the loss of loved ones, are contributing factors in the development of this disease which can be defined as a serious mental illness whereby a person who fears to gain weight, drastically reduces calorie input and although they feel hungry, they deliberately deny themselves food.

Right after eating excessively (binge eating), they frequently need to go into the bathroom to induce vomiting

Parents should avoid getting into power struggles with them, especially over food and other things directly related to their anorexic condition.

According to the "**Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)**" anorexia nervosa is defined as "*Persistent restriction of energy intake leading to significantly low body weight (in context of what is minimally expected for age, sex, developmental trajectory, and physical health). Either an intense fear of gaining weight or of becoming fat, or*

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Sit, Anthony J. Rothschild and Katherine Wisner, "A Review of Postpartum Psychosis", **J Womens Health** (Larchmt), 2006 May; 15(4): p. 352.

*persistent behavior that interferes with weight gain (even though significantly low weight). Disturbance in the way one's body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body shape and weight on self-evaluation, or persistent lack of recognition of the seriousness of the current low body weight".*

Clinically speaking, anorexia is defined as having a weight that is 85% or less of one's ideal weight, calculated by using the **BMI Formula** ("**Body Mass Index**") whereby our BMI I obtained by dividing one's weight in kilograms by the square one's height in meters, e.g.,  $BMI = 72 \text{ kg} / (1.65 \times 1.65) \text{ m}^2 = 25.7$ .

Values < **16.5** indicate **grave emaciation**, from **16.5 to 18.5** indicates an **underweight** condition, from **18.5 to 25** are values for **normal** weight and **overweight** or **obese** subjects have a BMI > **25**.

There are two types of anorexia, a **restricting type** where food intake is reduced by the individual without any purging or binge-eating, and a **binge eating/ purging type** where the individual engages in food binges and uses purging with laxatives and self-induced vomiting, to offset or "undo" the binging.

**Diana Ross** (born March 26, 1944) an American singer, actress, and record producer, suffered from **anorexia nervosa**. During a 1967 performance in Boston MA, Ross collapsed on stage and had to be hospitalized for exhaustion.

**Amy Jade Winehouse** (1983 – 2011) an English singer and songwriter who died at age 27, was also affected by **this disease** and was dependent on **cocaine** and **alcohol**.

Singer **Elton John** (b.1947) admitted suffering from substance abuse and **bulimia**, an eating disorder that made him consume large amounts of food, and then expel it by vomiting or using laxatives because he feared gaining weight.

**Michael Michael's** (1958-2009) symptoms show he suffered from a **Narcissistic Personality Disorder** (NPD) and as a result, arose a Major Depressive Disorder and drug abuse which lead to psychosomatic symptoms of Body Dysmorphic Disorder, Sleep Disorder and Anorexia Nervosa (his weight at autopsy was at 136 pounds).

"He would stand on stage for a full three minutes, motionless, no music playing, bringing the crowd to a frenzy. His attire was always militant-looking, his pants above the ankles to show his trade-mark glitter socks, intended to draw attention to his famous footwork. The building of emotions during the first three minutes of his concerts was beyond belief – each person feeding off the reaction of the next – a virtual wave of emotion. Then, in his distinct fashion, Jackson would begin with a bang, grabbing his crotch and pushing his leg into the air. His voice and dance moves both strong and commanding, his **striving for perfection** and his talent were very much apparent on stage... The excitement induced by Michael Jackson was somewhat akin to **euphoria** – he took his fans to another dimension. Once this state of euphoric social induction has been experienced persons may identify with the leader of the experience... Michael Jackson standing **motionless on the stage** for the first three minutes could be considered a means by which he defined himself as **superior** and **unique**, giving credence to his self-defined title as the King of Pop...



Publicly, Michael Jackson fit Freud's classical analytic theory as it relates to **narcissism** in that he fit Freud's definition of the **ego ideal**...



Michael Jackson with his father Joseph Jackson (1928-2018)

Michael's physical experience was closely tied to his **father's criticisms**. He mentioned that his father would tell him how ugly his nose and pimply his face was; that he was visually repugnant... his continual striving for physical perfection – could be diagnosed as **Body Dysmorphic Disorder** (BDD)... preoccupied with the ...shape, size or some other aspect of the nose, eyelids, eyebrows...lips, teeth, jaw, chin, cheeks, or head...

His father's love was conditional on Michael meeting the obligations set for him... It seems evident that not only did Michael Jackson's parents fail in providing psychological security, but also that Michael had to learn as a young child to **hide his emotions**, needs and memories in order to meet his parents' expectations and win their love.

Where Michael appeared happiest – where he could express his emotions – was the place he received his greatest accolades: **on the stage** singing and dancing. On stage is where Michael's idealized self was reflected back onto his iconic mirrored glasses... Michael Jackson's quest for perfectionism was apparent in every aspect of his life – especially his performances. This more than likely stems from the fact that Joe Jackson (as stated by Michael Jackson) 'had a belt in his hand' as Michael and his brothers rehearsed and that '[if] you didn't do it right, he would tear you up'... Michael might have felt happiest when he was musically engaged, as '**dopamine**, the neurotransmitter associated with emotional regulation, alertness, and mood, is released when people hear or perform music, and the dopaminergic system aids in the encoding of the memory trace'. As a result of years of musical practice, Michael's dopaminergic pathways would be acutely developed, which would create a somewhat

euphoric state when singing or dancing because of the stimulation the dopamine would give to the **pleasure centre** (the limbic brain which is the regulator of emotions)...

Michael Jackson presented differently **off stage**. He was quieter, he seemed less secure, which could connote a change in activity of the dopamine neurotransmitter. In essence, with regard to his personal life, his emotional brain engaged his dopaminergic pathways in a different manner. It was as if the avoidance of truly understanding his etiology was affecting his ability to function. **Oxycontin**, one of many prescription medications Michael Jackson was ingesting, stimulates the pleasure centre by releasing dopamine, thereby likely staving off his emotional pain, protecting his inner self from his outer self".<sup>4</sup>

Michael Jackson was addicted to Oxycontin and Propofol, a hypnotic agent.

NPD might be confused with **manic stage of BPD (bipolar disease)** with symptoms of grandiosity, need for control, substance abuse and lack of empathy even if these symptoms are unstable in BPD and stable in NPD.

Many Italian actors and singers, such as Vittorio Gassman, Sandra Mondaini, Ornella Vanoni and Renato Rascel became the patients of **Prof. Giovanni Battista Cassano** (b.1936), one of the founders of psychiatry in Italy. He wrote that **classic depression** is defined as the loss of initiative, with emotional detachment and feelings of guilt and doom and that in **acute depression**, persecutory delusions and psychomotor block are found.

Depression is becoming more widespread in young people who use amphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy and cannabis which first excite them but then make them acutely depressed.

The well-known newspaper editor **Indro Montanelli** (1909-2001) believed that depression was the most democratic of all diseases since it affects everyone, rich or poor, famous or unknown.

In January 2014, researchers at the Department of Experimental Psychology of the **University of Oxford** published the results of a study about the psychological traits of comedians. There, Gordon Sidney Claridge, Emeritus Professor of Abnormal Psychology, studied personality questionnaires filled in by 523 comedians (404 men and 119 women) from the UK, US and Australia.

These questionnaires showed that comedians had a very unusual personality profile with contradictory features: at times they were clearly introverted, depressed and schizoid, in other times they were unquestionably extroverted and manic. Other actors

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<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Brunner, "Michael Jackson: Was He the Man in the Mirror?", Research for her Master's Degree at Athabasca University, Athabasca (Canada), 2013.

did not show these features and were significantly different from them. Possibly, the comedians' extroversion was a way for them to overcome their depression.<sup>5</sup>

In **conclusion**, being an actor requires a range of **skills**, including a good stage, screen or vocal presence, the ability impersonate someone else, the ability to memorize scripts, a satisfactory understanding of dramatic techniques, creativeness physical stamina, persistence, discipline, dedication, ability to communicate with a wide variety of people and the commitment to become a performer. Becoming an actor isn't a sprint; it's a marathon, a very few succeed to make it, most remain unemployed since it is one of the most competitive professions in the world.

In this article some **psychological disturbances** were described in specific actors. These problems are **also found in the general population** and my purpose is not to imply that they are more common among performers or that their profession makes them more at risk. Generally the actors who suffer personality changes and psychotic disorders already have had some psychotic tendencies or were emotionally unstable even before starting the acting career. The majority of actors who cannot make a living at acting, take jobs that are flexible enough that they can leave to role at least in commercials.

However, our **natural narcissistic tendency** can boost their ego when they're on stage. Narcissism is a spectrum and most people are affected by it to some degree. In fact, **psychodrama** is often used as psychotherapy. In it, subjects use spontaneous dramatization, role playing, and dramatic self-presentation to gain insight into their lives. A psychodrama therapy group, under the direction of a licensed psychodramatist, reenacts real-life, past situations, acting them out in present time. A variety of scenes may be enacted, depicting, for example, unfinished situations, inner dramas, fantasies, dreams, future risk-taking situations, or unrehearsed expressions of mental states.

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<sup>5</sup>Ian Youngs, BBC News, "*Robin Williams and the link between comedy and depression*", August 12th 2014