

The Antagonist Force In Playback Theatre Finding The Courage and Positive Intention Within The Shadow

By Assael Romanelli

“Nobody wants to offend, but everybody wants to do good scene work. You can’t have it both ways.” (Carrane & Allen, 2006)

Introduction

We all believe that we are nice, ethical, polite and kind people. We (usually) don’t enjoy feeling or acting mean, jealous, vindictive, desperate, clingy or pathetic in our personal life. Therefore, Nobody likes to play negative or dark antagonist roles onstage.

In my years in Playback Theatre (PT), I have seen dozens of enactments where no actor dared to play the antagonist roles, and chose to play more socially acceptable, “better looking” characters. Since “nice people + nice choices= Boring Scenes” (Carrane & Allen, 2006), There is a deep need for antagonism in every story: *“A protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them”* (McKee, 1997, pg. 37).

Antagonist is defined as is a character, group of characters, institution or concept that stands in or represents opposition against which the protagonist(s) must contend¹.

In this article I will refer to the antagonist/antagonism not only to specific characters within a story, but also to the wider “shadow” aspect of the teller, the story and the characters.

In Jungian psychology, the “shadow” may refer to an unconscious aspect of the personality, which the conscious ego does not identify in itself. It also refers to the entirety of the unconscious. There are, however, positive aspects, which may also remain hidden in one’s shadow. To know yourself, you must accept your dark side. To deal with others’ dark sides, you must also know your dark side². Yet that same shadow is the seat of one’s creativity and therefore best be explored³ because it can be “a positive function if brought into awareness or remaining as a negative influence if ignored” (Tasker, 2017).

Through the years, I’ve learned that the greatest gift we can give ourselves, our fellow actors, the teller and the audience, is playing a strong, one-dimensional, emotionally loaded antagonist that does and says onstage what the teller would never dare. As Johnstone (1989) writes:

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antagonist>

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shadow_\(psychology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shadow_(psychology))

³ <http://ezinearticles.com/?Three-Dimensional-Villains---Finding-Your-Characters-Shadow&id=428279>

“The motto of scared improvisers is ‘when in doubt, say “NO”.’ We use this in life as a way of blocking action. Then we go to the theatre, and at all points where we would say ‘No’ in life, we want to see the actors yield, and say ‘Yes’. Then the action we would suppress if it happened in life begins to develop on the stage.” (pg. 94-95)

It has been my experience that most tellers (including myself) tend to tell their story in a more socially acceptable and somewhat censored nature. This is a natural adaptation that most people do when sharing something personal in public. In order to give the gift on an enactment that sheds new light and understanding, I believe that the PT ensemble must deconstruct the often ambivalent, semi-integrated, semi-censored story to its core elements. These elements should include the denied and censored internal voices of the teller (the teller’s shadow) as well as the other antagonist forces within the story. Playbackers should embody and enact the different (extreme) internal parts or characters, allowing the teller and audience to experience and process those voices separately, and the integration will either happen onstage organically or later in their hearts and minds.

Levels of antagonism

Adams (2013) writes antagonism can be found in several different levels of a story:

- Internal antagonism – internalized voices or parts within the teller’s actor (TA)⁴.
- External antagonism –
 - Human, inter-personal antagonism – specific people that resist the teller’s wish.
 - Environmental antagonism – objects/locations that stand in the way of the teller.
 - General antagonism – resistance from the world/society/fate.

Internal antagonists

Theatre (or screenwriting) *“is the art of making the mental physical. We create visual correlatives for inner conflict... images of character choice and action to indirectly and ineffably express the thoughts and feelings within.”* (McKee, 1997, pg. 230).

We all have different parts, or voices inside us. Some of our parts are more acceptable and accessible, while others are censored or “exiled” (Schwartz, 1997). More often than not, the teller voices the parts of him or herself that are more acceptable and likeable, while the more negative, weak or criticized parts are either hinted at or left out completely. In such stories, PT actors must look out for these censored parts, and dare to bring them

⁴ Teller’s actor (TA) refers to the actor chosen to play the teller in the Story. In this article, Protagonist refers to the teller’s character in the narrative, whereas the TA refers to the actor playing that role onstage.

boldly on stage, in order to clarify the internal conflict and allow teller (and audience) a chance to witness the struggle between these parts. This is a sort of “acting in”, an exploration of the psychological human experience through action (Blatner, 1996). In order to create powerful, emotional theatre, a conflict must be between two forces of similar “strength” (Romanelli, 2016). The shadow parts of the teller are therefore crucial to deepen the conflict of any PT enactment. Moreover, by embodying these shadow voices, the teller and audience can be allowed to clearly see and hear the possible voices of shame, guilt, aggression and vulnerability, thereby aiding them in reflecting which of these voices are “real” and which are more of a social construct/fear that is somehow associated with this story⁵. Furthermore, by enacting the negative voices, we actually allow a stronger agency for growth because as Carl Whitaker reminds us: “love and hate expand at the same rate” (Neill & Kniskern, 1989, p. 56).

Internal antagonists can be enacted on stage or sometimes just vocalized as a vocal ninjas from the side of the stage⁶.

External antagonists

There are 3 general categories of external antagonism:

Human, inter-personal antagonism

External antagonists can be specific people in the teller’s world. Most actors intuitively recognize human antagonists in the story, whether stated explicitly or hinted at.

Environmental antagonism

Objects and places in the teller’s world can be enacted as antagonist forces to the TA. *For example, the heavy weights that the protagonist keeps trying to lift, in order to get strong and muscular so he can beat up the class bully.*

The weights are opposing his wish to become strong, making him really work hard and confront himself and his laziness. Seeing how the protagonist deal with his shadow, embodied by his weights, deepens the enactment.

General antagonism

External antagonists can also be society/fate/universe, who stand in the way or even oppose the protagonist’s will. This general antagonist voice can be brought onstage as a symbolic character, a chorus or a vocal offer.

For example, an orthodox religious man wants to marry a secular woman of a different faith. In such a story, his religion can be enacted on stage as an antagonist force to his

⁵ Amittai Megged (Personal conversation, 2017) divides guilt to two categories. Imagined guilt, which refers to fears of being excluded socially or not being loved. This type of guilt is “imagined” in the sense that its source is external. “Real guilt” is guilt over violating one’s internal values or truly hurting someone else, and that is “worthy” of feeling.

⁶ See Romanelli (2013) for more on vocal ninja actors and non-human ninja actors onstage.

wish to marry, shaming and threatening him away from his heart's desire. Once again, by externally engaging and struggling with his religion, we will be able to see his deep fears, wants and desires. His active struggle onstage will deepen his character and the depth of the enactment.

The nature of the onstage antagonist

I find that the best antagonists are:

- **Active, One-dimensional, Emotionally “loaded” in relation to the Teller’s Actor (TA)** – Antagonists must have a clear feeling/desire toward the TA, and portray and act one specific emotion or want.
- **Connected to their positive intention** – beyond the external (and sometimes negative) behavior of the antagonist, there is a positive, good intention that the antagonist force works for. That intention gives agency and credibility to the antagonist actor.

Active, One-dimensional, emotionally “loaded” antagonists

I recommend playing Antagonists as *being emotionally loaded and one-dimensional*. In all good stories, the protagonist/TA must be the most multi-dimensional character (Mckee, 1997). The other characters, including the antagonists, must help shed light and complexity on the TA by forcing her to make onstage choices that will show her true nature: “*True character can only be expressed through choice in dilemma. How a person chooses to act under pressure is who he is. The greater the pressure, the truer and deeper the choice to character.*” (pg. 35)

Onstage antagonists that are multi-layered, complex characters without a clear want from the TA pull focus away from the TA and may dampen the heightened drama. Yet the more clear and one-dimensional the antagonist, the higher the emotional and behavioral stakes raised in the encounter with the TA, forcing the TA to make a clear statement or take action.

For example, the protagonist of the story is Lila, a 9th grade student who just got elected class president. A ninja actor comes onstage as Zack, her best friend who is happy for her and has no extreme feelings regarding the win. Lila is not forced to reveal her different internal voices and complex nature on stage. The scene will probably be one of casual talking between two characters.

But, imagine that Zack enters the stage as an antagonist character, full of jealousy and accuses Lila of stealing the victory from him, claiming that Lila signed up at the last minute and has no desire to actually lead a change in the school but just wanted to be cool.

In such a scene Lila will be forced to react and reveal another dimension of himself: will she admit that she does not care about change in the school? Will she admit that that this election is ridiculous and she just ran as part of a bet with her friends? Will she finally end this friendship with her pathetic friend and take back her friendship ring from him? Will she become facetious and allow herself to boast and ridicule the humiliating loss of his “friend” who even baked cookies for the whole class in order to buy votes? Will she confront him and admit that every though she is the most popular girl in school, deep down she feels worthless and is desperately seeking love? Will she try to buy his loyalty by offering him to be her assistant?

In the above example we can see that although the 2nd version of Zack is much less socially acceptable or polite, it drives the story forward, and immediately adds depth and complexity to the TA, in an organic, action-oriented nature.

Antagonists who are connected to their positive intention

In different counseling paradigms there presupposition that all our internal parts and people have a positive intention toward us (Schwartz, 1997, Knight, 2002). In PT, it is this positive intention that gives the actor the ‘fuel’ to fully embody this shadow/antagonist in a convincing way⁷.

It has been my experience, that once an actor allows herself/himself to fully embody an internal part/shadow, the first reaction is a huge release of energy, vitality and raw emotion. Once that first ‘wave’ subsides, the actor can then ask himself, or better yet, the positive intention realizes itself as an action-insight. Action insight is a “bottom-up”, somatic, intuitive understanding of self through action (Kellerman, 1992): “*Action-insight is closely related to catharsis and can be described as a kind of cognitive release of an idea from the unconscious*” (pg. 88).

In PT, a fully embodied antagonist ninja can realize his positive intention and deep motivation in relation to the TA. When this action-insight is organically realized onstage, it inevitably changes the antagonist onstage, giving a wonderful gift of richness and authenticity to the antagonist, thereby deepening his struggle with the TA, which in turn enriches the whole enactment (and sometimes leads to an action-insight of the TA).

Such a positive intention can give the antagonist ninja actor the sufficient internal justification and drive to surrender to the strong emotion and to give the TA (and the audience) a deep conflict. After all, if the antagonist is just a shallow, stereotypical character, then the audience (who usually roots for the protagonist anyway) as well as the

⁷ For more on positive intention in PT, see Romanelli, 2016.

TA, will not experience a deeply challenging conflict, and the “edge of the story” (McKee, 1997) will not be reached.

In our example, the actor playing jealous Zack can allow himself to be completely swept away with jealousy. He will yell, cry, warn, beg, threaten and humiliate himself. If he allows himself to surrender completely to the jealousy, he might discover that the positive intention of his jealousy is to connect him to the principle of fairness or the belief that the world is good and those who work hard achieve something. By confronting Lila with that deeper truth, he will force Lila to look in and struggle with her core values. Her subsequent actions will deepen and reveal more of her character.

Carrane and Allen (2006) write that actors are afraid of playing politically incorrect, or rude characters because

“... They’re afraid when they come offstage people will think the offensive character is who they really are. They have stopped themselves before they’ve even started. This limits their choices and stifles their imagination. At this point, we are not seeing life onstage, but a sanitized version. Why go out to see improv? You might as well stay home and watch TV. One of your jobs onstage is to portray life, real life, life that is uncomfortable and sometimes politically incorrect, or even impolite.” (Pg. 31)

I’ve noticed that by connecting to the positive intention, actors access more archetypal dimensions of the antagonist. In such cases, the audience experiences the antagonist more as an unavoidable truth, and consequently less judgmental of the actual actor.

Embodying an antagonist onstage

Emotional breathing is one of the key components that can help actors surrender in the feeling. Each actor has his or her own specific idiosyncratic breathing for different emotions. Actors can be trained to recognize and use different emotional breathing in order to access deep archetypal feelings, which in turn help access shadow parts. Emotional breathing is best practiced through the exercise of *emotional volume*, where actors access a certain emotional breathing (say anger) and slowly raise the volume from 1 to 5, by increasing the intensity of breath which naturally reshapes the posture, attitude and mindset of the actor.

Another method to train actors in antagonism is the exercise called *In the shadow’s shoes*. This exercise helps actors practice surrender to the shadow through a visceral exploration toward finding the positive intention of the antagonist.

Each actor closes her eyes and imagines an internal or external antagonist, complete with

their lead emotion/cognition/mantra, standing across from her. She then "steps into" that character and starts by finding the emotional breath of that part. Then she starts moving and speaking as that character, starting with the lead emotion/cognition that was originally chosen. They embody that antagonist fully and completely, allowing themselves to be swept away with that emotion. With time the original feeling/mantra will soften, to reveal the positive intention that specific part has for the actor. The actor will slowly refine the positive intention and allow empathy and compassion to arise toward this antagonist. When ready, she will face her original self as a fully realized antagonist and share the positive intention with herself. She will continue to de-role in the end.

In our example, Joe, the actor playing Zack, could practice playing his shadow part of Jealousy. He can imagine his jealous part standing in front of him, then "step into" that part, embodying it completely. After finding the physicality and emotional breath of his jealousy, he can begin to verbalize a stream of consciousness monologue of jealousy. After a while, he can wonder (or realize) what the positive intention of that jealousy is for Joe: How does the jealousy help protect or nurture Joe? How has it been a source of strength for him in the past? These realizations are verbalized and in eventually told back to Joe. He then de-role from embodying his jealous part. Now Joe is better equipped to fully embody a jealous character onstage, due to his rooting in the positive intention of that part in his own life.

Antagonist PT forms

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

This form was developed as a training exercise and later developed to a one-person PT enactment. It is based on famous story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, which centers on a person with split personalities, one good and one evil⁸.

The teller tells a story when there was a discrepancy between what she said or did externally and what she felt inside. We have found that in (almost) every story there is some sort of dissonance between external façade and the internal shadow antagonist. The actress begins with her back to the audience and slowly rotates clockwise throughout the enactment, like in the Shawarma-conflict form (Romanelli, 2016). She only speaks when facing the audience. Her first 'solo' is that of the external, social facade of the teller. In this solo she portrays what the teller did in reality. The last sound and movement (S&M) done just before completing the circle and turning her back again to the audience becomes the S&M for the shadow 'solo'.

Using the few moments of turning around with the back to the audience, the actress shifts her emotional breathing to connect to a shadow that she feels was either expressed by the teller or intuitively felt by her. She then begins a shadow 'solo', starting with the

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strange_Case_of_Dr_Jekyll_and_Mr_Hyde

S&M of the external part, and then continuing to develop that part, with voice, body and action. Usually the shadow will say and do things that the teller didn't dare, including breaking, hitting, killing, begging, collapsing and such. Again, the last shadow S&M becomes the anchor for the next external solo.

As the actress completes the shadow solo and returns to the external social solo, she must justify not only the physical S&M but also any change in her body posture and position onstage.

In the second (or third) shadow solo, the actress should wonder "how do I serve or protect the protagonist?" The answer sometimes arrives intuitively through an action-insight which when verbalized is often cathartic. Once that positive intention is verbalized, often the shadow solo evolves, and the end of this form can either be a neurotic integration solo or a shadowy positive intention solo.

Shadow Theatre

This short form is a variation of fluid sculpture. Each actor in the ensemble chooses either an external or internal antagonist. Each solo is emotionally loaded and one-dimensional. They come together to create a visual gestalt or integration of these shadows.

Antagonism map

This medium PT form allows teller and audience to see the TA encounter and interact with different antagonists in a non-linear, non-narrative way.

Once the story is told and the TA chosen, the TA leaves the stage and all the other actors will play different internal or external antagonists.

They dance onstage, allowing their breath to become more fast and full, charging themselves through emotional breathing, until the musician or conductor prompts a sudden stillness (Freeze), upon which "lets watch" is announced and the enactment begins.

The TA enters and starts to explore the stage. Every time she comes near a frozen antagonist, that actor unfreezes and begins a very short monologue and a short scene is enacted with the TA. This scene should be with high stakes with the antagonist forcing a behavior/decision/confession from the TA. Once the TA has made such a move, the antagonist freezes, and the TA moves onto a new still antagonist and another scene is enacted. This continues until all the antagonists have engaged with the TA.

The form can end with all antagonists speaking at the same time, or with an integrating, closing monologue of the TA. This form can also develop into a full Scene if the ensemble chooses so.

In closing, I hope this article will help conductors and actors dare to bring more darkness to the onstage lights – thereby allowing not only a richer enactment, but also an opportunity

for a deeper catharsis for teller, audience and actors.

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