

INTERVIEW



TSI: Hello, Mario, thank you for joining us. You've been involved with Kate and the Gang at TSI for a long time. We have experienced your creativity, your teaching ability, and expertise in group work. But we'd like to hear from Mario, about the man that we don't quite know. Please tell us something about your life.

Mario: Well, whether my story stays on a chronological path or not, I think I'll start at the beginning. I was born just after WWII, in Newburg, NY, across the river from the original Beacon sanitarium. An interesting synchronicity is that my second birthday was the day that Zerka and JL got married. When Zerka and I found this out we always sent cards to each other on December 8th – an anniversary card to Zerka, a birthday card to me. However, I never actually saw or worked in the theatre in Beacon but trained on that stage in Boughton Place, starting back in 1991, with Zerka as my primary trainer and Regina as one of my co-students.

I've been involved in theater since I was a little kid – started tap dancing at age 4. Being the only boy with so many girls in the class, created lots of opportunities for me to play this dancer-performer role to the hilt. Most of the routines were simply choreographed and done in the style of classic, musical theatre—numbers like “Tea for Two” and “Old Fashioned Walk.” It didn't matter to me what songs or routines, I loved it all!



Early on in junior high school, I realized that I wouldn't be able to make a career out of theater, so I started considering other options. Maybe I could become a doctor like our family doctor, Dr. Levy. I was good in science and I thought I could have a similar bedside manner; he was a great family physician—charming and gentle. I looked up to him, so why not be a doctor like him!?!

So, off to college, originally matriculated in pre-med and soon realized that I didn't want to be a doctor. But in my head, was my mother's psychodramatic image of who I would become. I would have to be a professional. So, I double majored in psychology and biology in Manhattan College; both majors that would require graduate school to make anything of them. To that end, I was awarded an NIMH Fellowship in child clinical psychology at George Peabody in Nashville, TN.

But it was the early 70's and the Vietnam War was in full swing. I loved my country but didn't believe in the war effort, so I served as a Conscientious Objector (CO).

TSI: Kudos to you for going through that whole process of becoming a CO. Some of those jobs are pretty nasty, along with being treated as a pariah sometimes.

Mario: Right, but somehow, I was blessed and I wound up in Environmental Education on the Hudson River, at the Wave Hill Center for Environmental Studies. I was lucky—the river I was looking at was the Hudson, not the Mekong.

TSI: Did you stay in NY after the war and get involved in theater there?

Mario: Shortly after finishing my CO responsibilities a few friends and I went “back to the land” on a 200-year old farm near Keene, NH. I got an MA in secondary education and taught for a year—hated teaching, so I became a waiter. Actually, I was a singing waiter for about 3 years. This allowed me to make some money and brought out the ‘ham’ in me. I loved performance of any kind and still dreamed to be in theater one day on Broadway.

Well, Keene, NH, is a long way from Broadway, but it was there that I had many opportunities to perform and direct, and I began working with kids as a founding member of the Children’s Performing Arts Center (CPAC). A group of area parents had seen a troupe from Boston that was looking at substance abuse and teen choices. As CPAC Director, I was asked if we could start a group for local teens around social issues. Although I didn’t know sociodrama at the time, I consented and so began my transition into the world of applied drama.

Working with this group gave me the opportunity to use psychology and theater to explore choices in real life on the safety of the stage. I knew this was much more than playacting, so I decided to get a second MA in counseling psychology at Antioch, New England. At that point, I was with a local non-profit that worked with court-involved youth, as a home-based family therapist. I soon realized these high-risk kids needed help *before* they got involved with the court system, so I started a program, called ACTINGOUT, addressing these issues.

TSI: Had you known of psychodrama or Playback Theatre at this point?

Mario: I think I might have heard about psychodrama, but not Playback Theater. But I had a teacher who was a Jungian analyst and knowing of my deep interest in theater and psychology, he urged me to find where Zerka was and to do training with her. Well, I did find Zerka at the Rowe Conference Center in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, where she was conducting a workshop on the psychodrama of dreams. The year was 1990 when we met and Zerka has said, and I concurred, that it was, “...love at first sight.”

So, I began training and was excited to use drama with teenagers and have a strong clinical grounding and format. I had been exposed to TSM’s TSIRA and it became the basis for healthy adolescent development. This was particularly so with the prescriptive roles—learning to claim strengths; the ability to engage or step back as the OE (Observing Ego); the ability to contain affect appropriately.

TSI: Is this when you met Kate and trained with her?

Mario: Actually, Sally Ember introduced me to Kate after I had been in training with Zerka. Sally was later the outreach coordinator of Safe School Ambassadors (SSA), a program of “Community Matters” in California, for whom I currently work for several months each year. But I’m getting a little ahead of myself.

Returning to my work with ACTINGOUT, I became very familiar with TSM’s TSIRA and prescriptive roles and saw this as a great foundation for my work with teens. So, I asked Kate if she would be my primary trainer for my TEP since the focus of TSM to work with trauma survivors dovetailed with my work. This is because so many of the kids were

marginalized, abused by parents and the educational system. They were different and excluded from the mainstream. Being in a group induced a positive peer culture and a sense of real family with the ACTINGOUT program.

TSI: Can you tell us a bit about the Safe School Ambassadors (SSA) program you mentioned? Just the title makes me imagine a highly respected and trained group of teens.

Mario: Well, in this program we train a group of about 40 students and 5-8 adults to work as 'ambassadors.' We teach them how to deal with problems of social mistreatment and to change the social norms. For example, a current social norm says it's cool and funny to mistreat your peers. This kind of mistreatment has very high costs: social, physical, economic—costs for the kids who are being mistreated, and also for the bystanders, the aggressors, and society.

TSI: Do you do psychodramas in the training?

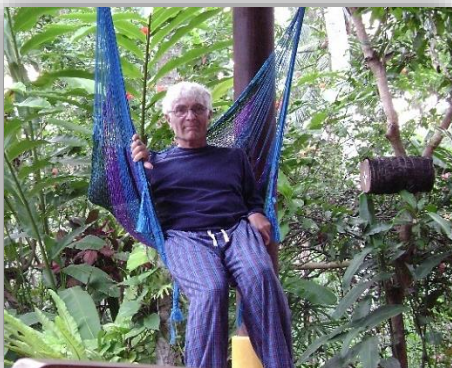
Mario: We do a lot of sociometry to help connect kids from various social groups, followed by role-training/simulation—how to communicate with friends about how they're treating people. Also, how to reach out to isolates. This program starts as early as 4th grade. Since 2001, there are 1600 schools involved across North America and beyond, with about 18 trainers working in the US, Canada, Puerto Rico, and Guam.

It's a wonderful program, so, if you don't mind, I'd like to send readers to their website: www.safeschoolambassadors.org

TSI: How did you end up in Bali? I'm sure there's a real story there!

Mario: Well, like Dorothy, when I clicked my heels 3 times that's where I wound up.

Actually, I first came to Bali as part of my 50th birthday dream trip and immediately fell in love with the country and the culture. I visited again, and then rented a house next to my friend, Richard's, for 3 months to make sure that living here, versus visiting, was what I really wanted.



TSI: Apparently, you decided to stay.

Mario: It didn't take long for me to realize that what I had felt as a visitor was amplified when I was a resident. I feel nourished here, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Living in a culture in which gratitude is part of each day's encounter suits who I am at this point in my life.

TSI: And, you're currently working in Indonesia?

Mario: Yes, I'm very busy and very fortunate. I'm working there, I travel to the USA for the SSA program, and also do work in Seoul, South Korea.

TSI: Can you tell us a bit about what you're doing in Bali? Are the people open to psychodrama?

Mario: Well, it's a bit of a mixed bag, and that's what keeps me hopping and excited. In Indonesia, currently, psychodrama is relatively new. However, people there have taken so well to it because in their culture spirit, art and daily living are completely intertwined—a very artistic and creative culture, even magical, in which story telling through dance and music are second nature.



In Bali, I established a business called Motivational Arts Unlimited (MAU) to provide training and personal growth experiences using creative and expressive arts (especially drama and movement).

The initials, MAU, spell the Indonesian word meaning "want/desire" and our logo is the Hindu god Ganesh, the overcomer of obstacles, dancing in life-affirming celebration. So, like Ganesh, our purpose is to utilize the arts to motivate change and overcome personal

and interpersonal obstacles to greater health—with enjoyment and a light heart!

I received this email from Wayan Rustiasa, founder and director of Campuhan College, and I think it explains best the quality of life in Indonesia and how psychodrama and all expressive arts work so well with Indonesians.

I am so happy that the team (Gung Tri, Mona, Kania, Janu, Pak Nyoman) are so eager to learn together...Balinese can relate to Psychodrama easily, we have been communicating so much through arts, gesture, facial and eyes expression, etc. I find that Psychodrama is very effective and fun way to connect with oneself and others.

Thank you very much, Mario, thank you for being part of our lives, for your invaluable contribution to all of us at Campuhan College.



TSI: Can you tell us a bit more about MAU programs at Campuhan College and elsewhere?

Mario: Well, MAU programs are multi-faceted. We offer services that fit into several broad categories (I had to write up the following for a Balinese interview, so I'm including it below):

- **Training in Motivational Arts:** This is the main function for which MAU was established—to offer training workshops and classes, especially for Indonesian human service providers. So far we've had a 2-day training for Youth Workers, hosted by Campuhan College and co-sponsored by Values Institute, World Interfaith Harmony Week, and the Asia Foundation. Twenty-four participants from Bali and Java received training



in basic techniques that they could use in their work. In early April, we offered the first of a series of psychodrama trainings at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta. There were 60 participants comprised of faculty from UI and other Universities, other human service providers, and UI graduate students.

- **Personal growth:** Motivational Arts are tremendous tools for personal growth and healing. We have offered several psychodrama experiences for expats and have conducted a 7-session, 21-hour psychodrama group for all 21 students at Campuhan College, co-facilitated by 5 of their staff. This has been a great way to continue the staff training that



had already begun, as well as provide a fun and effective tool for the students to measure their growth since becoming students at Campuhan, and prepare for their futures. To introduce the community to psychodrama and its benefits, I have directed monthly, open psychodrama sessions at Betelnut Café on the first Wednesday of each month and followed them with day-long psychodrama workshops for personal growth on the third Friday of each month.

- **Restoration and renewal:** Psychodrama and other Motivational Arts are great tools for celebrating what is right about our lives and enhancing our strengths and building a positive role repertoire. We offered a retreat at Gaia Retreat Center that combines the restorative power of psychodrama with Jungian Dream Work.
- **Business and Organizations:** Motivational Arts are great tools for team building, role training,



and for finding creative solutions to difficulties that occur within business or organizational settings. Not too long ago I did a wonderful staff training at Jari Menari Spa in Nusa Dua. They recently posted a video on FB of a song/movement activity I had taught them, and which they have now made into a regular part of their staff meetings.

- **Reflective Theatre:** This is a combination of Playback Theatre and audience-interactive improvisational theatre that focuses on thoughts, feelings, and stories of the audience, which the actors “play back” in creative ways to illuminate and honor the teller’s experience. We are looking for people now who would like to work together in this way to offer this type of theatre for local audiences, at festivals, in public settings, and as part of retreat offerings.
- **Musical Theatre Dancing:** This is an old love that is offered just for fun and fitness. Simple, choreographed routines were done to classic, musical theatre numbers like “Tea for Two,” and “All That Jazz.” The latter became a performance at a benefit for a friend to help her deal with medical bills after a motorbike accident.

TSI: Well, that’s certainly a spectrum that can keep you busy! I know you just returned from Seoul on your way back to Bali from the US. What happened there?

Mario: It’s been gradually developing in Seoul where I work at the Institute for Bibliodrama and Drama Therapy. I do a 3-day psychodrama training there 2 times a year for up to 50 students. I also conduct a ½-day ‘taster’ session in which I work with various topics or, as was just recently completed, offer an open psychodrama session. This coming May I will be offering my first, 3-day TSM-focused workshop. I’ll let you know as soon as the details are in place.

TSI: Mario, you’ve certainly filled our plates with so many goodies! I know there is even more you do, but can you just give us some final words of your life as an expressive arts therapist and performer?

Mario: Well, yes, there is more that I do, and there are a few words I’d like to say that encapsulate all that I do. All my volunteer and paid work, I do from love. The work I’ve done with adolescents for decades is propelled by passion. Love and passion – perhaps that’s why I’m able to keep going and enjoy it. It’s not a job; it’s not work; it’s an exciting life.

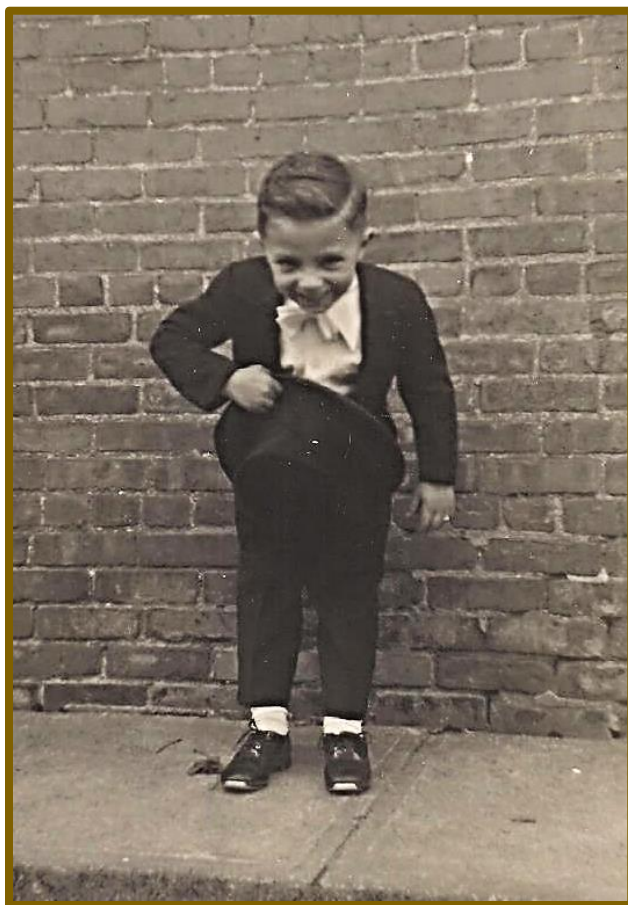


I’d like to add one more photo that helps describe Balinese life and culture. It’s a photo of one of many larger-than-life figures created in each village for the annual Ogoh Ogoh Festival. This occurs on the eve of Nyepi, my favorite of the Balinese holidays. It is a Day of Silence during which people remain indoors, use no motorized vehicles—even the airport shuts down. This is a time when evil spirits roam the earth and we remain indoors so they will not find us. Of course, that is a vast oversimplification, and I apologize to all Balinese for the inadequate job I have done of explaining. However, for me, it is a wonderful time for self-reflection, to re-connect with positive intention, and to affirm the daily practice of gratitude for all of life’s blessings that so infuse the Balinese culture.

This photo is also an incredible example of the way the Balinese use concretization in so many aspects of life, community, religion, and culture. How can any psychodramatists NOT find this paradise?

TSI: Wow! We hear you. And, thank you for spending time with us today and sharing the wealth that is Mario. It's been a delight dancing with you.

Mario: You're most welcome. It's been my pleasure.



You can visit Mario at

www.dramario.net