

Section 3: Interviews

An Interview With Zerka Moreno

Interviewed by Marcia Karp, At Holwell
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Marcia Zerka Moreno, we are very pleased to have you back at Holwell. The last formal video interview we did was back in 1983. So many things have changed in these 11 years.

Zerka They certainly have, and I'm glad to be back.

Marcia How would you describe Moreno's philosophy?

Zerka Well, he wanted to improve life itself. His idea was not simply to treat mental patients or to treat emotional disturbances; he wanted to improve life itself, to create a revolution, a social revolution, in which people would live more harmoniously together through studying their relationships and working on them together. So to think of psychodrama only as a clinical approach, magical as it can be at times, is not really the aim he had; he wanted to create a sociometric revolution; he wanted to improve on Marx, in fact.

Marcia Why did he want to improve on Marx?

Zerka He said there were things about Marxism which did not deal with the emotional reality underlying the social and economic reality and that religion hadn't worked, and science hadn't worked; maybe a combination of the two would. In fact, as you know, when we do psychodrama we come very close to a religious experience; there is something very loving about a method which brings one's fellow beings closer together. I've had a young girl say to me, "I'm supposed to feel this way in church but I don't; after psychodrama I love my fellow men so much better." If one really plans the combination of the two, where the sociometric approach, the measurement of human relations, is inadequate or insufficient, then one brings in psychodrama. Moreno never believed

that psychodrama was the be-all and end-all of solving the problems of humanity. So what was his philosophy? He wanted to be a healer of mankind; that was his goal in life.

Marcia So do you think he wanted to create other healers of mankind?

Zerka Absolutely. He knew he couldn't do it by himself. In fact, he defined group psychotherapy as "one person the therapeutic agent of the other—one group the therapeutic agent of the other." He said before he died, "If God comes back, God will come back as a group." That the healing group will expand into other groups was really his model. He was inspired, you know, by the great religions of the world, the whole idea that prophets don't sit and wait for the people to come to them, they go out into the world and contact the people where they are, where they live, where they suffer.

Marcia Tell me about Moreno and Martin Buber.

Zerka They were contemporaries. Buber was influenced by Moreno. Moreno wrote all his German books anonymously but under a general editorial title, called *Einladung zu einer Begegnung* (*Invitation to an Encounter*). He started that in 1914. He wanted to create encounters between human beings, not as a finished or final product such as a book, in which an author does not meet face to face with his readers unless the readers come to dialogue with the author. The book was only a stepping stone for the meeting itself. Between 1918 and 1920 Moreno edited a German literary magazine called *Der Neue Daimon*, *The New Demon*. He respected Socrates, who had spoken of the Demon, or inner voice. One of the contributors to that magazine was Martin Buber, a theologian. At that time Buber wrote Hassidic stories; he was not yet writing *Ich und Du*, *I and Thou*. That appeared later, I believe in 1924 or 1925. There was a letter between Moreno and Buber, and Buber remembered being in touch with Moreno. He was then living in Jerusalem. Buber came from a more orthodox Jewish background than Moreno, and he is closer to a classic model in relationship to God. Moreno was influenced by others: Jesus, Buddha, Socrates, these were the figures that inspired him.

Marcia Moreno introduced the idea of the Godhead in his work. What did he mean by the Godhead?

Zerka He looked back at the beginning of the "one God" and the enormous contributions made by the Hebrews, who eliminated the many gods and worshipped just one. There had been prior to that only one other instance, among the Egyptians, when the "Sun God" was worshipped for a fairly brief period. Everywhere else there were numerous gods. But maybe this one God was not such a great contribution after all. Maybe it would have been better if the Greeks had prevailed; who knows? But in fact, the Jews are the people of the Book, the Bible. They

proclaimed, "Hear O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one." That was a God of great power and wisdom, distant, remote. The orthodox Jews are not allowed to speak or write out his name. Moreno identified the Hebrew God as the "He God." He thought that the Jews, being like children, believed that the world had been created in the past somewhere, long before they came, just as when you enter into your family, when you are born, you enter into an unknown world. They saw the world established by a God long before they were born. That God created the world and then stopped creating. But Moreno said, actually, the universe is also God, is constantly being transformed, still in development. Then he saw the Christian revolution as a way to bring God closer to the human being, embodied as a human being. People could relate to that God experience on a more intimate level; it was a God of closeness and love. That God he called the "Thou God." However, he observed that that great idea of the God of Love has been betrayed so many times and in so many different ways by people that we need a new manifestation of God, one that fits our image of the world better. He pointed to a Godhead that is not outside of us but inside, the Godhead within, and he called that manifestation of God "The I God." And with that inspiration he declared, "I am God." That has been profoundly misunderstood. He heard voices, and these voices conveyed these truths to him, not in the sense of a mental patient but as a seer. He declared, among other statements, "I am the father of my father," and that was interpreted as megalomania. He was not talking about one individual "I" but as a collective "I." Everyone carries this God within, everyone is a part of God, all of us together make God. We are co-creators of the universe and responsible for the welfare of every other being in it. But God needs us as much as we need God to help create the universe, which is always in becoming. And God is always in becoming, as long as we are there to carry the God within us, within ourselves.

Marcia I remember when I was in training I was very excited once because Doctor said I was a genius, and I ran back to the house, and Elaine Goldman was there, and I said, "Elaine, Doctor called me a genius," and she said, "He called me a genius an hour before," and somebody else was at the table and said, "And he told me I was a genius yesterday," and maybe that is part of his idea of the Godhead—that everybody has the genius inside of them and that all he has to do is affirm it for them and they will help bring it out themselves.

Zerka That is a very good point. I think one of the great gifts he had in touching other human beings, especially people younger than he, was that he was able to see them not as they were here and now but as they

could become, their potential. And he gently led you to that potential and would be able to tell each individual, "You're a genius." He never said it to me directly, but I heard him say to someone else who said to him once, "That is a very interesting young lady," as I was leaving the room, and he said, "Oh, she's a genius in her own right." So he really had that sense that the genius is also within and just has to be recognized and affirmed.

Marcia But he said it to another person.

Zerka Yes, in that case he said it to. . . .

Marcia Another person.

Zerka Perhaps because our relationship was so close; one often doesn't say to one's nearest and dearest the things you need to say.

Marcia Exactly. Yes. Did he tell Jonathan that he had genius potential? How did he encourage his own son in that way?

Zerka I don't know. I'll have to ask Jonathan if he ever told him that directly, but the wonderful thing about J.L. was that when Jonathan confronted him or asked a question, his first answer was always, "Yes." "Yes, Jonathan, that's very interesting." And then he would elucidate. He might say, "Let's look at this" or "On the other hand. . . ." So he gave him a lot of affirmation. However, when he graduated from college, he was unable to come to the graduation because he was already quite old then, he was 82, he arranged a birthday dinner with Jonathan, myself, and he at a local restaurant, with a cake complete with a sparkler . . . you know, a Roman candle on it, and Jonathan was very touched. When I tucked J.L. into bed that night he looked at me, took my hand, and said, "You need not worry about Jonathan, he is very gifted, very talented," so I am sure he saw this human being who was just beginning to come forth at age 21 and would blossom into some very worthwhile human being.

Marcia So his "Yes" was affirming the question; he was not answering it. He was affirming the fact that Jonathan had asked a question, and the answer was almost a detail, which, in a way, would create somebody who has confidence in their question-making ability.

Zerka Right. Right. Philosophers ask significant questions. My son took his degree in philosophy.

Marcia Interesting point. And Jonathan is now in the field of medical ethics, asking questions—sometimes quite brave questions. Do you think that Moreno's philosophy relates to the world as we now know it and in what way?

Zerka Well, in all fairness, at one point, about four years before he died, he was somewhat disillusioned in his ability to reach the larger world. He really had hoped to create a sociometric revolution, a revolution in human relations. However, when death was approaching he became

more realistic. I sat by his bedside crying—trying not to cry because he was telling me that he was satisfied with what he had achieved. As to Moreno's philosophy, I think the answer is, yes, it has all sorts of possibilities. I think it has not begun to be really minted yet—his legacy—and people don't appreciate sufficiently the tremendous flexibility of this approach in many different fields. He was years ahead—maybe a century ahead—of his time, and some people are just beginning to catch up with him in psychodrama. They haven't begun to catch up in sociometry. They appreciate sociometry, but somehow the interest went down; perhaps technology began to interfere with the man-to-man relationship that he was so careful to indicate and to specialize in and to foster. But the more we advance technologically, the more we need it; we are becoming more and more isolated, we isolate ourselves with machines; we contact each other through machinery. What has happened to the face-to-face encounter? Now you may say it enriches a lot of people who might not otherwise encounter. On the other hand, it may take away the minimum encounter of the people right around them.

Marcia Mary Northway and Helen Jennings were the ones who, in the early days, supported by Moreno, took up his ideas on sociometry—two women—and it was men who took up his ideas of group psychotherapy, and who began to take his ideas of group psychotherapy, and who began to take his ideas of psychodrama. I wonder if perhaps that had some bearing on the fact that psychodrama went forward more than sociometry did.

Zerka Sociometry among the sociologists was very well accepted, and if you look at the table of contents of different journals, the largest number of people who really contributed were actually men. The only significant females were Joan Criswell, Mary Northway, Helen Jennings. There weren't that many females.

Marcia No, no.

Zerka Thinking in those terms may lead us into the wrong track. I don't believe that's quite correct.

Marcia Right. Right. But it is interesting that you as a woman are carrying on his work all over the world.

Zerka Mmm.

Marcia Would you ever in a million years have thought that you would be doing this at 77 years old?

Zerka Never. I often think, looking back, "My life is a fairly tale." I came to Beacon looking for a new life for my sister, who was psychotic, and what I found was a new life for me. That was a profound lesson for me, by the way, and the lesson for me was in this lifetime, whatever

else you do, don't search for yourself. Look to help other people, and then you will find what you need. . . . Very profound lesson.

Marcia Maya Angelou has a wonderful line in a poem. She says, "They came in a nightmare and hoped for a dream." It's lovely—I mean, in a way. . . .

Zerka It's exactly what happened in my life.

Marcia Yes. Yes.

Zerka It was a nightmare—a horrendous one. I was terrified that my sister would not come through it again. This was her second psychotic attack in a few years.

Marcia And Moreno used to say that the best things happen by accident. Your liaison with him became the important one, even though you had come to him to care for your sister.

Zerka Yes. Right. You know that Father Divine, a black prophet, not very well known in this country, said, "Things don't just happen, they happen just." That's quite an idea. As we age and hopefully mature, we need to start looking at our lives; we have that sense of the completion of our lives. If we have lived it fairly well we say, "Yes, that's just the way it should have been." That's what I feel about my life. Yes. I could have dreamed it, but it's just the right way. . . . I mean, it's like a beautiful dream.

Marcia But there aren't many people who accept their lives like that. I remember giving birth, and the big question was, "Was it a boy or was it a girl?" And when the baby came out it was just what we wanted. I think many people are so very disappointed at their own life to which they give birth. I would guess that's why so many people in middle age and those who become older get so disillusioned and angry and bitter . . .

Zerka . . . and resentful . . .

Marcia . . . and resentful . . . but you don't feel like that to me at all.

Zerka It's marvelous, it's been so rich.

Marcia Yes, I've given that a lot of thought. Obviously I cannot do it by myself. That's why I am so glad there are good helpers like you. Let's talk about needs, because the world is so full of desperate needs. I think we need a psychodrama emergency center in every city, at least one or more, where people can come before they commit the murders, the rapes, the burglaries, the killings, the violence, the child abuse, where they can come and work out their problems 24 hours a day, where they can say, "No, I don't need to do this, let's go work it out." I think that is absolutely essential. We do not have enough hospital emergency rooms yet; we need psychodramatic emergency rooms. I want to see psychodrama emergency centers everywhere—in every school, in every hospital, in every administrative center, in the government, everywhere—where we can really alleviate some of these concerns that we are struggling

with in our world. On the political level, you know Moreno wanted Khrushchev to meet Eisenhower in role reversal, in life; he would have gone himself to wherever that could be done, to direct it.

Marcia And Mao and LBJ. . . .

Zerka Yes, all that.

Marcia I remember one night being in the living room when he telephoned Mao Tse-tung in China. He phoned him up, and Mao's secretary said he was asleep. Moreno wanted to invite him to an encounter with LBJ; do you remember that?

Zerka Yes. He also phoned LBJ, but he couldn't get through. And so on that level I would like to see psychodramatic schools for young people before they become engaged to get married or live together to test out their roles—not immediate roles, their role potential, their dreams for their life. What is it they are looking for, to find out? Is this a suitable mate before they become parents? When they are parents they need centers like that where people can learn to live life more fully, more fruitfully, more completely, more satisfactorily. You know the statement that I told you, "Life is a test; it's only a test; if this were your actual life you would have been given better instructions." My word, we need, we need those better instructions.

Marcia One thing I noticed, to move to a different subject, I noticed at the conference in Oxford that really Moreno has established an international language and in some respects an international behavior, that is to say, we all know what doubling is, what auxiliary ego is, and here a person from Japan can talk to a person in Mexico and they still know what each other is talking about. Do you suppose that this international language and behavior among people who work in groups all over the world . . . do you think that the language has influenced just people who work in groups, or do you think that that international language and behavior spills over to ordinary nonprofessionals?

Zerka I think it's spilled over. It is more concrete and specific, but it spills over. The sociologists told Moreno, "You have been absorbed by the culture." Now, if you pick up a New York newspaper, for instance, they use the word *psychodrama* hit and miss all the time. They do not know what they are talking about. It has become a kitchen term.

Marcia And it's in Webster's dictionary.

Zerka Yes. I remember when I bought the Random House dictionary back in the fifties, it had *psychodrama* in it, it had *sociometry* in it, it had *sociodrama* in it. The *Petit Larousse* in the fifties had *Moreno* in it.

Marcia Moreno died in 1974, and here we are in 1994. How does your relationship with J.L. affect your work 20 years later?

Zerka As I get older I think I approximate the essence of this man more and

more. I get closer to what he really meant and to what he meant to convey to people. Sometimes people talk about my simplicity. I think it's a sort of purification process one goes through in this work. I really think I am a more refined director than he was, and people tell me so, those who saw him work, except how he was with the psychotic patient. Then he was absolutely touching, wonderful, inspired, and inspiring. He loved them and was challenged by them. He was not so interested in the neurotic or normal persons. The crazier, the better.

Marcia Why do you think it took you 20 years to refine the essence of this man?

Zerka Well, if you are living partly in the shadow of such a powerful human being, simply establishing your own identity is a task, it takes time. I remember him saying to me, "We are so identified, at the beginning of our relationship." I replied, "Yes, but we are not identical." However, in this world, where men predominate anyway, he was very generous; he was a lot more generous than many geniuses are who deal with women. He would make space for me and encourage me and let me know, "You can do this." In that sense he was extremely generous. On the other hand, I became his helpmate when he could not function any more; I took over, gave him a great sense of security.

Marcia He always asked the other, "Now what do you think about that?" I remember his being very impressed with that, age 23. He would ask me, "Well now, what do you think, Marcia?" I would think, "Why does this man want to ask me?"

Zerka Perhaps he knew you had wisdom in you.

Marcia Well, or that he really liked to hear his ideas debated, discussed; he liked a sounding board, I think, and so on. But you began really as an auxiliary ego, I mean, here was a man you fell in love with; you probably spent Saturday nights doing psychodrama or whatever. . . .

Zerka Working.

Marcia Working. So what was it like to be in love with a man who was directing a group session, and once in a while you would play a mother, or you would play a sister, or you would play a double or . . . I mean, you were quite dependent on his direction for many years, really?

Zerka No, I think he called upon my auxiliary work because he knew he did not have to direct me very much. He very rarely directed me, in fact. He gave me a lot of leeway. He grasped my ability to take care of this and to go along with him. We were a team. So he began to depend on me as well as I depended on him for his wisdom and his knowledge; he depended on me for my skills.

Marcia I remember in training you used to tell a story where you doubled a patient, and at a certain point the patient said to Doctor, "You don't understand me," and then he said to you as a double, "You explain me

to him." The patient felt you, as a double, understood him better than Doctor did. In classical psychodrama, in the early days, Moreno used a double quite often, quite routinely, and I know that your style has changed, and you have begun to feel that the quintessence of directing is to extract that information and those feelings from the protagonist. When did that happen, that you began to change the use of the double? How did that happen?

Zerka You have to realize that Moreno's most profound work was with psychotic patients whose rationale is very bizarre and hard to understand. So, just as that young patient said, "You explain me to him," he realized that the doubles began to translate this bizarreness to him, the doubles helped him to understand and grasp better what these patients were experiencing, what they were about. Well, as we move more and more towards the norm, especially with students, I realize that these people need to learn to speak for themselves, so what I do now, very often, is turn it around. We were instructed as auxiliary doubles to extract the essence of the internal from the protagonists, to speak those emotion: and confront those ideas, which they were unable to give voice to. I do the opposite. I say to the double, "You are your interior dimension. That double will represent your exterior. Don't deal with the exterior; you've now got someone who will take care of that; you deal with your inward self." That is the turnabout that I discovered, and it came in the course of a psychodrama when a mature student was doing a very profound session and suddenly jumped up and said, "I need to be my own double at this point."

Marcia "I need to explain myself to me."

Zerka Right, . . . "and you and I know best now what I am feeling."

Marcia Has your directing changed in any way over the years?

Zerka Yes, it certainly has.

Marcia I know you take shortcuts, that's one thing I notice. You don't scene-set as much as you used to.

Zerka No, I scene-set where I consider it necessary, as a warmup.

Marcia As a warmup.

Zerka Yes. Where it is not essential or might distract from the protagonist's warmup, I don't use it, as in the case of a patient who was transported into a psychological world where time and space fell away altogether, everything merged. She wove a pattern, but she didn't weave a room or a space. The other thing is, I have learned to trust the process to a point where I can relax. I have very little preconceived ideas where the session must go, unless I have a very clear notion what the protagonist is struggling with. Then I may say to myself, well, I need to reach this or that area that the protagonist has not been touching on. With a new

protagonist, especially, I become very naive, very receptive, let it happen, and extract my inspiration from the source. That has become my style. I don't need to prove myself or prove that the method works. It takes care of itself somehow. In the beginning many directors think they have to be clever, they have to prove themselves, they have to perform. It's not a performance, it's a dance. It's a dance with other people, and it has to be harmonious dance, not in the sense that "I am the director, I'm going to do this."

Marcia I suppose, when you think about the tango, you have two people to do that tango. "It takes two to tango," clearly, whereas if you had a more modern dance, people dance quite individually, and both are looked at, whereas in the tango or a dance like that where you need each other, each part to complete the whole, and what you are saying is that you are following each other all the time so that there aren't individual performances, there is the relationship, the encounter, the psyche, and the Godhead that is created between two people.

Zerka Right.

Marcia Could you explain the original concept of surplus reality?

Zerka Well, Moreno saw that his patients moved into areas which were not real to him or to you or to me but were real to them, and often they went beyond fantasy in a way, beyond intuition, almost like a trancelike experience, and he began to think, "Ah well, Marx conceived of surplus value; what the worker produces and the capitalist gains from that labor is the surplus and really shouldn't go to the capitalist, it should go back to the workers." And Moreno said that surplus reality is out there somewhere, and I must make it concrete and specific and return it to the center of the protagonist, where it has meaning and purpose; I can't meet the psyche unless I live in this surplus reality along with the patient.

Marcia So it wasn't necessarily a good thing or a bad thing, it was . . .

Zerka . . . a developmental step . . .

Marcia . . . and it was surplus to the reality that was being created at the moment, and it helped Moreno understand the other thoughts and ideas that were going on, which weren't expressed in this moment.

Zerka It casts reality into a different light, a purely subjective one which only the protagonist knows. Here's an example. A patient comes from New York City in the train to Beacon. We know that this train tends to be rather a grubby one, nothing glamorous about it. When she reenacts the trip, she describes it as being royal blue in color, and it is taking her to heaven. Her road to heaven was actually a road more akin to hell because she was entering a profoundly psychotic state and had to be placed in a mental hospital. You and I may think this is just a fantasy,

but for her it is a reality. We know it to be fantasy. For the patient it is more than a fantasy, it is her reality.

Marcia So it is added reality.

Zerka Added for us, yes. But we must deal with it as her reality; it creates a new framework of operation altogether.

Marcia What I find interesting is that in some psychodrama sessions surplus reality enters the drama; in others it is totally not there. So working inside somebody's body, doing the scenes, for example, from inside the stomach, inside the head, would you say that that would be working in surplus reality, or is that another reality? You understand? Some therapists, for example, if they have a protagonist with a brain tumor, might say, "Right, let's go inside that head, let's go inside the tumor, let's see what that scene feels like to you. . . ."

Zerka I think any role reversal, whatever its source, is a form of surplus reality. It's going beyond personal reality of who you were before, seeking the reality of some other being or some other thing, and that is itself surplus. These are surplus reality techniques.

Marcia Mmm. What does it feel like to you to be 77 and still working, harder than you worked maybe 15 years ago?

Zerka Well, I don't think I worked hard. What happened when I sold Beacon seemed like semiretirement because I was only able by contract with the Horsham people to use the theater two weeks a year. When Horsham was sold to a real estate developer and the theater was threatened with destruction, I suggested to Clare Danielsson that she might take over the theater. She did and had it reconstructed at Highland, New York, across the river from Beacon. I also wanted Moreno to go on living in the theater. By rescuing the theater I rescued my career and made it possible to work almost any time I wanted to in that wonderful theater. I wasn't thinking about me, I was thinking, "This theater mustn't die"; it was impossible for me to let it die. So again it was a resuscitation out of an idea of a gift to something or someone other than myself, the focus of which, in turn, gave a gift to me. Do you see? It gave me my working career back as a gift.

Marcia Absolutely.

Zerka And so, yes, from that moment on I began to work again more intensely. And what has happened is I do very little mailing or advertising; it happens mostly by word of mouth. If you work at something 54 years (it will be 55 years now very soon) something happens to your name, it becomes a legend in itself, so people come to me and say to me, "You are a living legend." They told Moreno that, by the way, in his lifetime. That's what happens, and they want to see and experience this living legend before it's too late. So the pressure is not only on me, it's also on the others.

- Marcia So, at 77, how often are you running groups? Every month . . . ?
- Zerka Monthly, and sometimes more often. For instance, I will be working in August in Cambridge, and I will be working in Denver and Massachusetts. September I'll be working several weeks on my own, maybe a weekend, and a group coming from abroad. In October I have two groups coming from abroad and my own training groups.
- Marcia Elaine Goldman and I used to talk about the possibility of having a retirement home for psychodramatists. What do you think that would look like if you could do a future projection of all of us psychodramatists who worked 15 of our years, or 30 years, or 60 years; what might that retirement home be like?
- Zerka Oh, I think it would be a hell of a lot of fun. We would all have our reminiscences in action.
- Marcia Yes. Right. Right. Great. But who would be able to get up to get the tea?
- Zerka We would share our lives with each other. It could be wonderful. Where can we find such a center? (Thinking and laughing)
- Marcia Thank you for talking this morning (Thinking and laughing) . . .

FINAL THOUGHTS

After this stimulating interview, I was left with these thoughts. Should Holwell become a retirement home for old psychodramatists? Would we ever sleep, or stop laughing or crying or telling stories in action? Mmmmm. If it is true that old psychodramatists don't die, they just fade away, we could even have an entire cemetery for psychodramatists. Future psychodrama trainees could come to the cemetery and say, "Oh, look, there's Adam and Allee Blatner, there's Dale Buchanan, there's Sandra Garfield and the Sirokas, there's Zerka Moreno—and look—there's even an empty space for me."