
Book Review: The First Psychodramatic Family

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***The First Psychodramatic Family.* By J. L. Moreno, Zerka T. Moreno, and Jonathan Moreno. United Kingdom: The North-West Psychodrama Association, 2011. (Original work published 1964.)**

Reviewed by John Nolte⁸

In 1914 Jacob Moreno Levy published a book, *Invitation to an Encounter*, in which he invited its readers to meet him in person. In 1964 Levy—now known as J. L. Moreno—along with his wife, Zerka T., and son, Jonathan, produced *The First Psychodramatic Family*, a book that invites its readers into their home and family life. In the first paragraph, Moreno alerts us that this is a psychodramatic account, not a historical, analytical one, and begins it with a collection of Morenean myths and legends. We might want to recall that Joseph Campbell taught us about the truth in myths. Another insightful person, whose name I do not know, also said, “The facts are a small part of anything that happens.” A new edition of *The First Psychodramatic Family* has been published by the North-West Psychodrama Association of the U.K.

This is a book of many parts. In addition to Morenean myths (most of which Moreno himself wrote), there are reprints of articles about Moreno, psychodrama, and sociometry that appeared in newspapers from all over the world. Here you can read theater critics reviewing the Stegreiftheater in Vienna, and articles documenting events in the history of psychodrama, such as the sociodramatic trial of Adolf Eichman and the furor that it caused, Impromptu Theater in Carnegie Hall, and many more. There are also magazine articles like the *Saturday Evening Post* story of psychodrama with a murderer at the notorious Matteawan State Hospital, and a chapter in Alexander King’s autobiography describing his first psychodrama. A couple of dialogues, one between Moreno and Thespis, are also included.

A large part of *The First Psychodramatic Family* is Zerka’s delightful poetry, first anticipating Jonathan’s arrival, and then documenting his experiences in encountering and coming to terms with the strange and wonderful world into which he has been born. Deeply moving, as when Jonathan and Zerka deal with

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the loss of her arm, always touching, entertaining, and frequently amusing, these verses communicate much more and far better than a recitation of facts could possibly do.

Much of this material serves as a manual on the use of psychodramatic technique, primarily role reversal, in child rearing. At the same time, it is a handy manual of parent training. One of my favorite passages recounts an event at the dinner table. Zerka is strongly urging Jonathan to eat. Don't all mothers do that? Jonathan isn't hungry and the food on his plate is unappetizing. As the struggle escalates, J. L. calls for a role reversal. "Jonathan" (played by Zerka) says, "I can't eat." "Zerka" (as played by Jonathan) has the solution. "She" says, "Then don't eat!" and the contretemps is resolved.

Although many of the items in this book have been previously published, they are widely scattered throughout the psychodrama literature. To this unreconstructed Morenophile, *The First Psychodramatic Family* is a *boîte à bijoux*, full of psychodrama gems. The student of Moreno's methods who is embarrassed by Moreno's often-noted megalomania—and I know there are some—may have difficulty with his selection of pieces to go into this little book. They can be construed as bragging. However, to someone who experienced as much criticism, even ridicule, as Moreno did, moments of approbation are important and welcome. And considering what he has given us, I think he is entitled to a brag or two.