

Book Review: The Theatre of Spontaneity

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***The Theatre of Spontaneity*. By J. L. Moreno. United Kingdom: The North-West Psychodrama Association, 2010. (Original work published 1983.)**

Reviewed by Adam Blatner⁹

The Theater of Spontaneity is a reissue of the now hard-to-find book, along with a few additions and some editing. These and other books by J. L. Moreno were restored and republished in 2010 by chief editor Zoli Figusch and others in the North-west Psychodrama Association of England.

Moreno originally published *The Theatre of Spontaneity* in 1923 in German anonymously, with the title *Das Stegreiftheater*. Moreno at this time not only experimented with anonymity, but also changed his name in the mid-1920s from Jacob Levy to Jacob Levy Moreno (Marineau, 1989). Re-owning his authorship later, *The Theater of Spontaneity* was republished by Moreno in English in 1947 by his own Beacon House press in Beacon, New York. Moreno's publishing house was in the same location as his main residence and his sanitarium. Beacon is about 40 miles north of Manhattan on the banks of the Hudson River. Moreno also used this publishing enterprise to put out his other books and several journals.

This present edition was based on an edition published in 1983, nine years after Moreno's death in 1974. It was reissued by Meg Givnish, who worked at, and was sponsored by the Horsham Clinic. (These folks for a short time were the inheritors of the stock of books when the institute and Beacon House operation closed around that time.) This 1983 edition included some additions to the original.

Since Moreno's death, the number of people using psychodrama, sociometry, sociodrama, and related approaches has increased significantly in Europe, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and other countries. There has been a corresponding growing market for psychodrama books. The originals are rare and often pricey, so this 2010 reissue will be a welcome addition for many people coming into the field. Appreciation is due to Mr. Figusch and his team for these restorative efforts.

What I like about Moreno is that he allowed himself to contemplate the deeper meanings of spontaneity. Unlike those writing about improv theatre,

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Moreno dared to consider the interactions of psychology, sociology, leadership, history, theology, and metaphysics. In doing so, I think his intuitions are somewhat valid: The world in the early 20th century had become compartmentalized, and he dared to re-vision the manner in which people and cultures all operated in terms of multiple, interpenetrating, and holistic systems.

The second point—about spontaneity—is problematic, because this very basic dynamic is used in multiple ways by Moreno in other writings. At times it seems to be the equivalent of improvisation, while at other times it seems to focus on the psychological state that operates behind the activity of improvisation. (I tend to favor this latter meaning). I think he has a germ of a truly great idea: Creativity is important! (This idea is related to Henri Bergson's philosophy, which was still somewhat popular early in the last century (Bergson, 1911.) Moreno acknowledges this influence, but goes further in generating a wide range of methods that could develop our creative potential individually and collectively.

A third point is also valid: Tele, as elusive as it can be as a concept (and Moreno uses it in different senses in his writings), does speak to a lively dynamic that nowadays has been written about by others as part of social intelligence, or what the Brafman brothers describe in their book, *Click* (Brafman & Brafman, 2010). Simply stated, the dynamics of rapport are worth studying, and the power of rapport to build or undermine a social system should not be underestimated.

What I don't like about his writing is that I find myself asking, "What does this mean?" At the same time, having read enough in the realms of philosophy and psychology, I strongly suspect that Moreno elaborates the aforementioned points and a few more to make overstatements that can neither be proved nor disproved.

Knowing Moreno's personal history affects the reading of this book. Moreno could be engaging, and inspiring charismatic at times; at other times he was painfully capricious, petty, clearly narcissistic, and in other ways problematic. This then explains the contrasts in the mixed nature of his writing. That Moreno was brilliant and enormously energetic is clear. But then he'd make a statement like the following: "There is an alternative dream of Man, that of survival and creation which is neglected—that he will be able to create a set up by means of which the total universe can be ruled and integrated into the self." This line on page 11 seems to have been written by a comic book writer as spoken by the character of the mad scientist! While I'm willing to grant Moreno flights of enthusiasm, I wouldn't want young people today to read this without knowing that there are jewels mixed in with such flights of grandiosity.

Later in the book Moreno describes his experiments. He used general plots, so some of those experiments were more like theatre, like *Commedia dell'arte*, with masks and backdrops too (page 69). Contemporary psychodramatists never resort to such props. It's clear that Moreno has evolved, but he doesn't say so explicitly. Being clear and consistent were hardly priorities with Moreno.

His books are difficult and must be read with a willingness to discuss and interpret. I think it's important to ask whether a given statement might be an overgeneralization or in some other way overstated. A process of translation is required almost continuously: What was Moreno trying to express? In what

settings might it have more or less application or validity? His writings are difficult, not just because of any language shift (i.e., from German to English when he was in his late 30s), but because Moreno was a multi-level visionary, and so impelled by the force of his ideas that the content could not contain them. For me, as a semi-loyal audience, even now I put down the book after a few paragraphs and sigh with exhaustion.

I'm aware that as the field has become increasingly international, there are people here and there who want to delve into the original writings in a more scholarly fashion. Zoli Figusch and his team have done our field a great service, and they have put in uncounted hours of work on this project. These early books of Moreno's had become extraordinarily hard to find. I wish them well and welcome their finding things that I may have overlooked. I'd rather learn something new than wallow in the illusion that I know enough. But I will suggest, dear colleagues, that separating the figurative gold from the dross will not come easy.

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