

Reviews

Book Review

***Impromptu Man: J. L. Moreno and the Origins of Psychodrama, Encounter Culture, and the Social Network.* By Jonathan D. Moreno. Bellevue Literary Press, 2014.**

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This biography of the founder of psychodrama is a well-written contribution that will be of great relevance to the readers of this journal. It presents in considerable detail many facets of J. L. Moreno's (1889–1974) biography. It's a fascinating read, and I heartily recommend it for all psychodramatists. The author is Jonathan Moreno, J. L.'s son and a professor of bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania. His father is reconsidered in the context of a number of cultural developments in the 20th century.

Two other biographies of J. L. Moreno exist: One, part of his autobiography, was also edited by Jonathan Moreno and first appeared in the *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama & Sociometry* in 1989. (It was republished in 2011 on Lulu.com.) Dr. Waldl published this in German as: Waldl, Robert. (2005). Another biography, by Paul Holmes, was published in 1989. *Impromptu Man*, in slight contrast, addresses more the emerging social context in which J. L. Moreno participated. There is much here I hadn't known, or knew of only vaguely.

It's rich in anecdotes, including bits that have emerged in the interim since those other biographies were published. Jonathan Moreno mentions Waldl's (2005) publication of his discovery of Buber's earliest writings on encounter, for example. Another source that came into print more recently is about Peter Lorre's starting out with J. L. Moreno's improvisational theater troupe. On page 31, Jonathan Moreno also notes problems with the semantics of the word "psychodrama," and a little later he uses the term "systematic role playing." On page 33 he acknowledges that his father was "notoriously stubborn, proud, and independent."

It's also a good text for thinking about the emergence of a number of sociopsychological trends in the last century. The author was only 7 when his father was 70. He not only is a recognized medical ethicist but is interested in modern history. His aim was to "connect certain previously disconnected dots in J.L.'s life and in the development of his ideas and the impact of those ideas."

Jonathan Moreno seems willing to consider how problematic his father could be. Creating this book was not easy for him. He has written, “The truth is that [J. L.] was a terrible historian, often getting dates wrong and using his fertile imagination to alter events” (J. D. Moreno, 2014). On page 50 of this book, he confessed the unlikelihood that events his father remarked on decades after their occurrence happened precisely as he reported them. Indeed, I have commented on other personal weaknesses of J. L. Moreno’s that may have hampered widespread acceptance of his ideas and methods (Blatner, 2000).

I was most struck with the way J. L. Moreno’s efforts wove into the work of so many others, and collectively their work ended up in the encounter group movement, in social network analysis—which is a contemporary revival of some aspects of J. L. Moreno’s thoughts about sociometry—and in other trends. For example, in addition to briefly mentioning Paul Torrance, J. L. Moreno’s writings have had some impact on others involved in creativity development, which in turn has influenced new trends in positive psychology.

The book reminds me of books written by James Burke, the latest one, *Circles* (2000), typifies his noting the thick matrix of influences and connections among many pioneers of history. J. L. Moreno was the prime mover in only a few developments that continue to be influential today, but he was a secondary or tertiary influence in scores of other trends, from group psychotherapy and encounter groups to applications in sociology, role theory, experiential education, management training, and experiential approaches in family therapy and self-help groups.

As Jung wrote about the pioneer in a new field, we should avoid overly “conserving” J. L. Moreno’s own words (1948, p. xi). That is to say, his writings and work should not be taken as a final formulation, but rather, in the spirit of the archetype of creativity, we should continue to build on these ideas. This biography further strengthens this idea. Nor is the author’s work final: One aspect of genius is that other interpretations can also fill out and extend the creative ideas beyond that of the person who channeled them.

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