

Book Review

***J.L. Moreno and the Psychodramatic Method: On the Practice of Psychodrama.* By John Nolte. Routledge, 2020.**

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What is psychodrama? Is it the first non-Freudian psychotherapy? A collection of theater games? A hip 1960s-style group experience? A conveniently ambiguous reference point for literary snobs? A quiz show clue? A punk rock song title? A cultural trope? Or is it all of these or something else? John Nolte thinks he knows.

Nolte, a psychologist, scholar, and psychodramatist for more than 50 years, is in a good position to sort it out. For a period in the 1970s, he was the training director at my parents' psychodrama center in Beacon, New York. It was a critical time for psychodrama as the torch was being passed from my father, the founder (to whom I will refer as J.L.), to my mother, his most important protégé. By then, psychodrama therapy had become a global phenomenon and was about to be regularized with rigorous training standards administered by an independent board of examiners. The later 1960s had been both favorable for psychodrama as the precursor to encounter groups and Gestalt—the annual meeting of the psychodrama organization typically drew more than a thousand participants in New York—and also damaging for the ease with which its powerful techniques for “acting out” could be exploited by those who lacked training and, in some cases, were happy to exploit its emotionally charged potential. The very word was even adopted both by sex workers in advertising and by Alex Comfort in *The Joy of Sex* (1972), who recommended it as far superior to psychoanalysis in bed.

Accordingly, Nolte's goal is to provide a systematic account of psychodrama as a far more comprehensive and systematic practice than is generally understood, one based on a set of philosophical premises. But even Nolte has trouble fitting psychodrama's breadth into an elevator speech. “Generically,” he writes early in the book, “psychodrama is a method of creating dramas, a systematized form of children's creative role playing. It is a *dramaturgy*, an art form. As such, it is also a *method of communication*. Psychodrama is a way to explore, understand, and express one's subjective experience, a *method of personality development*. Psychodrama is also a *method of training*, an *educational process*, and a *research instrument*” (emphases in original).

Nolte is surely right, but the manifold nature of the method helps explain why it is both so rich and so hard to capture in an academic sense. (I have heard

that a perplexed graduate student complained to his mentor about the scope of J.L.'s theorizing. "Look," came the reply, "if you'd come up with either role playing or social networks the way Moreno did, you'd say you've had an immensely successful career.") Therefore, although his book is not a how-to manual—one would have had to have witnessed at least several psychodramas to fully appreciate the concepts and skills Nolte describes—it is a wonderfully useful and sophisticated guide to the many faces and forms of psychodrama practice. He walks the reader through "the basics," the various phases of a psychodrama session, the way the subjects (called protagonists) describe their dramas, and then to chapters that explain varied applications, psychodrama theory, and history. Nolte adds a bit about J.L.'s sources of inspiration and his aspirations for the use of the method for a healthier society by combining psychodramatic role playing with his sociometrics, the precursor to today's social network theory, which is mainly the province of mathematicians and physicists.

Among Nolte's references to his long career in psychodrama is one that readers may find particularly surprising: his work with trial lawyers who immediately took to the method. For those of us who know some litigators, the fact that they would appreciate the importance of performance makes good sense, but Nolte's account is nonetheless illuminating about the range of the practice. Psychodrama is a powerful and immensely varied method. Yet, as Nolte's work with litigators illustrates, even for one who grew up in the midst of psychodrama culture (as did the present reviewer), it can feel amorphous. One reason lies in the underlying existential philosophy that Nolte references. In the academic year 1978–1979 at the University of Texas at Austin, I had lunch once a week with the eminent philosopher Charles Hartshorne. When Hartshorne realized my father was J. L. Moreno, he recalled a remark that J.L. had made during a psychodrama demonstration at the University of Chicago. "Your father said that creativity was the most important idea of the 20th century. I agree with that!"

A deep faith in creativity and its spawn, spontaneity, motivated J.L. all his life. In a famous essay, the Oxford don Isaiah Berlin contrasted the fox, who knows many things, and the hedgehog, who knows one big thing. Of the two options, J.L. would surely have seen himself as a hedgehog. But the full meaning of some big things, such as Plato's forms and Darwin's evolution, exceed easy grasp even for their originators. It remains for their successors to discover their implications. With this admirable book, Nolte establishes himself as one of them.