

## BRIEF REPORT

### Moreno's *Idée Fixe*

The theory that underlies and unifies Moreno's varied work may be discerned by contemplating the relationship between two key historical texts—Moreno's description of his "idée fixe" and his autobiographical story of "God-playing" when he was 5 years old. The focus of this article is to consider the origin, meaning, and value of Moreno's *idée fixe*.

In the 1947 translation and revision of his *The Theatre of Spontaneity*, Moreno wrote that he felt he "suffered" from an *idée fixe*, a French term for a mild obsession, not so much in the pathological sense, but rather more as a guiding vision.

The idee fixe became my constant source of productivity; it proclaimed that there is a sort of primordial nature which is immortal and returns afresh with every generation, a first universe which contains all beings and in which all events are sacred. I liked that enchanting realm and did not plan to leave it, ever. (p. 3)

The following selection from Moreno (1947) is what I consider to be the most revealing and possibly the most meaningful paragraph in his writings:

When gradually the mood came over me to leave the realm of children and move into the world, it was with the decision that the idee fixe should remain my guide. Therefore, whenever I entered a new dimension of life, the forms which I had seen with my own eye in that virginal world stood before me. They were models whenever I tried to envision a new order of things or to create a new form. I was extremely sure of these visions. They seemed to endow me with a science of life before experience and experiment verified their accuracy. When I entered a family, a school, a church, the house of congress and any other social institution, I revolted against them in each case; I knew they had become distorted and I had a new model ready to replace the old. (p. 4)

Following this passage, Moreno went on to write about various aspects of the theater and then shifted to philosophical musings. Because Moreno wrote no more explicitly about his *idée fixe*, I feel that a further explication is indicated in order to appreciate his basic approach.

The second clue to Moreno's thinking lies in a consideration of his well-known "God-playing" story. Briefly, he was home playing with some friends in the basement of an old house, and he suggested they play God and the

angels, with himself in the role of God (naturally!). The children then constructed a tower of chairs and tables, and in the heat of the enactment, little Jake climbed to the top of the tower and sat precariously on a teetering chair. "Come on," called his pals, "you can fly too!" And little Jake, caught up in the moment, forgot his reality-testing and flew. But in the nonenchanted realm where gravity continues to exercise its dominion, the child tumbled down, breaking his arm (Marineau, 1989, pp. 15–17; Moreno, 1946, pp. 2–3; Moreno, 1989, p. 20).

Because Moreno failed to explain fully his own dynamics, I shall indulge in a bit of psycho-historical speculation: Faced with this traumatic re-establishing of the power of the reality principle over the pleasure principle, did our hero submit? Not Jake! His counter-will was too developed. (Here I weave in a little theory from Freud and Rank.) I imagine this child's response might have been: "I can too fly! I will fly! I will find a way to make my dreams, my fantasy, my play come true!"

The shame of defeat in his childish God-playing was denied, and he marshaled the mental defense mechanism of reaction formation: "I am not impotent, vulnerable, little. I am a creator. I can make up stuff! I can pretend to fly, and find kids who will play with me. And if that isn't as good as really, actually, physically flying, well, it's almost like that, and it's a whole lot better than acting as if I couldn't fly." Thus did he sustain his illusion of the supremacy of imagination over the constraints of reality.

An interest in storytelling and drama offered a more mature form of sublimation for this urge, this affirmation of the imaginal. This made his thinking a little less primitive in its grandiosity and omnipotence. But, because his growing vision involved the ongoing thrill of creativity of the actor-producer, he naturally chafed at the idea of having the actor submit to having to play a character created by someone else. He felt strongly that the way theater had evolved in Europe detracted from the spontaneity, the immediacy, and the personal self-expression functions provided by the imaginative play of childhood. These modes of theater were degradations of the essence of the potential for drama to serve as a mind-expanding and socially more immediate process.

I think Moreno's *idée fixe* functioned as an image of freedom that reaffirmed the possibility of preserving the pleasure principle as embedded in the fantasy play of childhood. Yet this slightly neurotic response was also a source of a genius-level insight: He synthesized many sources of creativity, from the biblical stories of prophets (and he was especially impressed with Jesus as prophet) to the writings of contemporary philosophers such as Bergson and Peirce (who wrote about creativity and spontaneity, thus giving him adult intellectual matrices for his desires). The milieu of Vienna at that time fostered creativity, and he found many models, friends who encouraged and stimulated his imagination. The many opportunities for social and cultural experi-

mentation found expression in inspirational, religious poetry; social action; and his work with the Theatre of Spontaneity—expression that led to the synthesis that became psychodrama.

Moreno's genius was that instead of withdrawing from the frustrations to his imagination, he responded with a creative synthesis. He compensated for the limitations of human life by developing methods for at least symbolically overcoming many of those limitations, through the medium of drama. Beyond this, the use of action-imagination as a theme allowed him to extend the use of dramaturgical methods to therapy, applied sociology, child rearing, education, and relationship enhancement.

Another way to appreciate Moreno's *idée fixe* is as an archetypal image, an expression of a numinous sense of the potential of the imaginal. This draws on a Jungian understanding of psychology. Numinosity is a useful concept, referring to a quality of experience that is infused with particularly vivid significance. Something is numinous if one perceives it emotionally as profoundly important. Falling head-over-heels in love partakes of the numinous. Finding a calling; encountering a story, myth, picture, scene that is deeply inspiring; and encountering one's vocation refer to that category of experience in which one's soul or spirit comes into sharp resonance. Occasional dreams or images can be numinous.

I submit that Moreno's "idée" was so "fixe" because it was numinous and resonated with some conjunction of archetypal images moving in his soul. And it also expressed the successful resolution of a complex—a pampered, idealized child developing a narcissistic character style and then going on to shift from mere selfishness to what Alfred Adler would call "social interest" or "community feeling," committing himself to be useful to others not only to affirm his own creativity but also, in the spirit of the philosopher Berdyaev's admonition, to foster creativity in others.

I contend that Moreno's *idée fixe*, his vision of an "enchanted world" in which "primordial nature" returns "with every generation" may be translated as the realm of childlike multipotentiality. I believe this concept can serve as a unifying vision also for psychodramatists, helping to integrate the seemingly quite diverse endeavors and elements in Moreno's system. This has been the source of my own inspiration, and I am continually refreshed by contemplating the Moreanean worldview. Moreno's vision synthesized the Dionysian and the Apollonian; the egocentric, soul-amplifying power of personal imagery; and the social, organized, focusing power of methodology.

#### REFERENCES

- Marineau, R. F. (1989). *Jacob Levy Moreno, 1889–1974*. (A biography) London: Tavistock/Routledge.

- Moreno, J. L. (1946). *Psychodrama, Vol. 1*. Beacon, NY: Beacon House.  
Moreno, J. L. (1947). *The theatre of spontaneity*. Beacon, NY: Beacon House.  
Moreno, J. L. (1989). The autobiography of J. L. Moreno, M.D. (ed. by J. D. Moreno).  
*Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama & Sociometry*, 42(1), 15–52.

ADAM BLATNER  
3509 Bonnie Road  
Austin, Texas 78703-2603

**Copies of articles from this  
publication are now available from  
UMI Article Clearinghouse.**

**For more information about the  
Clearinghouse, please fill out and mail back  
the coupon below.**

The UMI Article Clearinghouse offers articles from more than 11,000 copyright-cleared periodicals in a wide range of subjects. You can place your orders electronically, as well as by phone, mail, and telefacsimile. For more information, please complete and mail this coupon to UMI Article Clearinghouse, 300 North Zeeb Road, Box 11, Ann Arbor, MI 48106 USA. Or call toll-free for an immediate response: 800-521-0600. From Alaska and Michigan call collect 313-761-4700. From Canada, call toll-free 800-343-5299.

YES! I'd like to know more about UMI Article Clearinghouse.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Company/Institution \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

**U·M·I**

A Bell & Howell Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 USA