

# Therapeutic Theater and Spontaneity: Goethe and Moreno

EBERHARD SCHEIFFELE

---

---

ABSTRACT. Moreno noted a similarity between a late 18th-century play by the great German scholar and artist, Goethe, and some elements of psychodrama, which can be substantiated; however, Goethe was not, as Moreno suggested, an early promoter of spontaneity. The similarities and contrasts between these two men are intriguing.

---

---

IN 1973, MORENO ADDED TO THE SECOND, ENLARGED EDITION of *The Theatre of Spontaneity* a chapter entitled "Goethe and Psychodrama," which is a reprint of Diener (1971) and Moreno (1971). In the preface to this new edition, he proclaimed "the importance of Goethe as a forerunner of both therapeutics through drama and his esthetic sense for spontaneous production" (Moreno, 1973, p. 1). This is surprising because Goethe is rarely related to therapy and spontaneity.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) is probably the most important and prolific German-speaking author of any time. He was already famous by the time he was 25 and is widely acknowledged as a "universal genius," excelling equally as a politician, poet, novelist, playwright, actor, theater director, and scientist. His fame only grew after his death, and up to this day, he is one of the most written-about figures of European history and continues to be an idol for many German-speaking youth.

Jacob Levy Moreno (1889–1974), on the other hand, never achieved the recognition he felt he deserved. Although best known as a psychiatrist, Moreno also developed a theory of the nature and function of theater, and his ideas have influenced a number of American theater companies (for an assessment of Moreno's contribution to the field of theater, see Scheiffele, 1995).

Of the dramatic theorists that came before him, Moreno commented main-

ly on Aristotle, from whom he adapted the concept of catharsis, and on Goethe. Having himself grown up in a German-speaking culture, he joined in the admiration for Goethe:

It is therefore a special honor to know that the great poet and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe thought along psychodramatic lines and that he wrote plays on the subject. There is no writer in the Anglo-Saxon literature, not even Shakespeare, who has attained Goethe's rank as an overall creator in the sciences and arts. (Moreno, 1973, p. 122)

### Therapy Through Drama: Goethe's *Lila*

The main evidence Moreno presented for Goethe's knowledge of the therapeutic effects of dramatic enactment is his little known "Singspiel" (a play with songs) *Lila* (Goethe, 1968, p. 181–214). The play tells the story of the baroness Lila, who is being cured from madness. After she is mistakenly notified that her husband has died, she no longer recognizes anybody, not even her husband when he returns. Questioned by Doctor Verazio (originally in 1777 played by Goethe himself; see Carlson, 1978, p. 28), she proves to be living under the delusion that her husband has been imprisoned by evil spirits. She also thinks that these spirits are after her and that she has to find a way to rescue her husband. Doctor Verazio now starts to direct everybody in a "psychodrama" in which Lila's friends and family portray Lila's subjective world, complete with fairies and evil spirits. Lila goes on a long journey in which she interacts with the fairies and fights with the evil spirits. Only after she has "conquered" the demons, is her husband introduced to her. Now she recognizes him and thus regains her sense of reality.

Lila's doctor Verazio indeed appears to be speaking of psychodrama:

If we could cure fantasy through fantasy, we would have created a masterpiece. . . . Let us enact for the lady the story of her fantasy. . . . At last fantasy and reality will meet. (Goethe, 1968, p. 191f; translations are mine)

Goethe's words here remind us of Moreno's prescription for the use of psychodrama with psychotic patients, as described for example in a chapter entitled *Psychodramatic Treatment of Psychoses* (in Fox, 1987, p. 68–80). First the therapist enters the patient's reality and places his or her delusions and hallucinations in front of him through a psychodramatic enactment, with the help of what Moreno calls *auxiliary egos*, psychiatric aids, or other patients who play the different parts. Thus the patient sees his psychotic experiences objectified. In this fashion, the patient is brought out of his internal fantasy world and starts to relate to these new "anchors" on the psychodramatic stage. As more and more of these anchors are introduced to the stage, the patient regains his connection to his environment.

It is remarkable to see how Goethe's *Lila* contains elements of Moreno's psychodrama, although the term was of course unknown in Goethe's time. Goethe himself was, however, well aware of the psychotherapeutic significance of his play, as he stated in a letter dated October 1, 1818: "The subject is actually a psychological cure in which one lets madness enter in order to heal madness" (Goethe, 1968, p. 682). The name he chose for the doctor, *Verazio*, is formed from the Latin word *verax*, meaning truthful or speaking the truth. This reminds us of Moreno's definition of psychodrama as "the science which explores the 'truth' by dramatic methods" (Moreno, 1946, p. a).

Historians have generally attached little importance to the play. As one critic puts it: "*Lila*, an operetta presented on the Duchess Luise's birthday, was a work of less literary significance, apparently hastily put together by Goethe for the occasion" (Carlson, 1978, p. 28). Even more unimaginatively, another writes: "The Singspiel *Lila* is a piece of occasional poetry, whose origin and deeper meaning cannot be directly deduced from the text" (Gertrud Rudloff-Hille in: Goethe, 1968, p. 679).

A classical psychoanalyst writes about *Lila* in *Goethe: A Psychoanalytic Study*, in which he explains for several pages the importance of the fact that "Goethe was constipated on the day when he started to write *Lila*" (Eissler, 1963, p. 246). Perhaps not surprisingly, he sees support for analysis even in an example of a nonanalytic method:

Far away as Verazio's therapeutic methods were from Freud's marvelous therapeutic instrument, it is valid to see in them a remote historical precursor. Thus *Lila* bears witness to Goethe's preoccupation with finding an intellectual program for removing the shadow that the unconscious throws upon the conscious mind. (Eissler, 1963, p. 237)

Moreno's and Freud's ideas were antithetical: Moreno emphasized dramatic action, whereas Freud stressed intellectual analysis.

In his own tribute to Goethe, Moreno was quick to point out that, although the play is *about* psychodrama, it is by no means itself a psychodrama. As a written play it is, rather, what Moreno called a *cultural conserve*—his term for the finished product of a creative effort that is then being repeated without spontaneity.

Reuchlein (1983) compared Goethe's ideas with other psychological views and concluded (on p. 57) that the healing methods exhibited in *Lila*, although part of a literary tradition, are also founded on views about psychotherapy proposed and practiced by progressive therapists of the period. He reported, for instance, that as early as 1758, Ernst Anton Nicolai had commented on the cure of a psychotic who believed that he carried an elephant's trunk instead of his nose. A surgeon put a cut in the man's nose and claimed he removed the trunk. Nicolai argued that this was an example of a cure effected through a

trick by pretending to believe in the patient's delusion and then removing it (Reuchlein, 1983, p. 52f).

In his discussion of *Lila*, Moreno reached the following conclusion:

And if one wants to give full credit to Goethe, one can say that, at least to my knowledge, no other playwright has constructed *an entire play*, that is, *every scene, every word, the entire structure of the play*, to demonstrate drama itself as cure. (1973, p. 123)

### Spontaneity in Goethe's Work

Although Moreno's previous point is well substantiated, it is more questionable to link Goethe to spontaneity and improvisation. Goethe is mostly known as a part, if not the beginning, of the tradition of German directors who took complete control of every aspect of the production. Nevertheless, Moreno stated:

I was aware that Goethe was interested in impromptu theatre. In his book *Die Lehrjahre*, second book, ninth chapter, he wrote: "Spontaneity theater should be introduced into every theater. The ensemble should be trained regularly in this manner. The public would benefit if an unwritten play were produced once a month." (1973, p. 122)

Moreno was talking here about Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. In the chapter referred to, the protagonist and a group of friends are on a boat ride, when one of them suggests that they should improvise a scene. Everyone takes on a role, and they have to pay a forfeit whenever they fall out of character. They all enjoy the game with great wit and humor. During this game, they also pick up a stranger who immediately joins in and plays the role of a country priest. It is this man who is speaking in the passage Moreno quoted:

"I find this exercise," said the stranger, "among actors, even in the company of friends and acquaintances, very useful. It is the best way to lead people out of themselves and after a detour back into themselves. It should be introduced to every company, that they have to practice sometimes in this way, and the audience would surely benefit if every few months a non-scripted piece would be performed, for which the actors of course would have to be prepared through several rehearsals."

"One should not," added Wilhelm, "think of an impromptu piece as composed on the spur of the moment, but rather as having known plot, action, and division into acts and leaving the way of performing to the actor." (Goethe, 1962, p. 123)

This may be questionable, but it is certainly not uncommon to attribute statements by characters in Goethe's novels to their author. But even if we accept Moreno's thesis for staging plays in this fashion, the above quote, espe-

cially Wilhelm's response, conjures up images of *Commedia dell'arte* rather than Moreno's spontaneity theater. Moreno, however, rejected the idea that psychodrama or his theatre of spontaneity was derived from *Commedia dell'arte* (Moreno, 1946, p. 12; see also Scheiffele, 1995, p. 79–86).

As director of the Weimar Court theater from 1791 to 1817, Goethe directed only written plays—his own as well as others'. Carlson's (1978) account of Goethe as a director contains only one reference to improvisation: "Goethe's constant attention to rhythmic delivery eventually brought his actors to the point where, it is reported, they could even extemporize in blank verse" (p. 304).

Whereas this suggests that improvisation was not completely foreign to Goethe and his actors, the rest of the account seems to contradict, rather than support, Moreno's claim. Goethe was concerned with educating the audience and with a unified aesthetic effect. This drove him to exercise total precision and control.

Goethe seemed to be seeking a striking and carefully composed stage picture—composed even down to the placement of the individual fingers and the angle of the head, as we see represented in paintings of Weimar productions and described in detail in Goethe's instructions to the young actor Heinrich Schmidt in 1801. (Carlson, 1978, p. 305f)

There is no talk about Goethe letting his actors explore their true emotions and expressing their creativity. On the contrary, the image we get is that of a director reducing the actors to robots expressing his own ideals of beauty. Goethe as a director thus epitomizes the kind of directing that Moreno rebelled against: the kind concerned with perfecting cultural conserves and reducing the actor to a tool.

Both Goethe and Moreno wanted to reform the theater that came before them (Table 1). Goethe found himself surrounded by sloppy theater and hence started to exercise strong control as a director. Moreno, in turn, rebelled against the theater that he found too controlled, predictable, and removed from the lives of the actors and the audience. Thus, he started to experiment with improvisation and audience involvement.

Whereas Goethe emphasized external qualities such as pronunciation, posture, appearance, and memorization, Moreno emphasized internal qualities such as spontaneity, truthfulness, and creativity. Moreno was intent on exploring the actors experience; Goethe was mainly concerned with the effect on the spectator.

### Conclusion

Goethe's play *Lila* did represent a precursor of some principles of psychodrama; but as a director, Goethe's actual style and emphasis were sup-

**TABLE 1**  
**A Listing of Goethe's and Moreno's Ideals of Acting**

Goethe's acting	Moreno's acting
External	Internal
For the (passive) audience	For the actor/active spectator
Self-concealment	Self-revealing
Memorized	Improvised
Controlled	Expressive
Aesthetic goals	Therapeutic goals
Professional actors	Nonprofessional actors
Proscenium stage	Open stage
Poetic language	Natural language
Ensemble work	Spectators join actors
Classic themes	Personal themes

porting highly conserved productions and led to exactly the kind of theater that Moreno condemned.

#### REFERENCES

- Carlson, M. (1978). *Goethe and the Weimar Theatre*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Diener, G. (1971). Relation of the delusionary process in Goethe's *Lila* to analytic psychology and to psychodrama. *Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama*, 24, 5–13.
- Eissler, K. R. (1963). *Goethe: A psychoanalytic study*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Fox, J. (Ed.) (1987). *The essential Moreno*. New York: Springer.
- Goethe, J. W. (1962). *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, Berliner Ausgabe 10*. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag.
- Goethe, J. W. (1968). *Poetische Werke, Gedichte und Singspiele, Berliner Ausgabe IV*. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag.
- Moreno, J. L. (1946). *Psychodrama: First volume*. Ambler, PA.: Beacon House.
- Moreno, J. L. (1971). Comments on Goethe and Psychodrama. *Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama*, 24, 14–16.
- Moreno, J. L. (1973). *The theatre of spontaneity* (Second, enlarged edition). Ambler, PA: Beacon House.
- Nagler, A. M. (1952). *A source book in theatrical history*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Reuchlein, G. (1983). *Die Heilung des Wahnsinns bei Goethe: Orest, Lila, der Harfner und Sperata*. Frankfurt: Verlag Peter Lang.
- Scheiffale, E. (1995) *The theatre of truth: Psychodrama, spontaneity and improvisation; The theatrical theories and influences of Jacob Levy Moreno*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, Dissertation (book in preparation).

