

THEATRE OF SPONTANEITY **REVISITED**

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This pithy volume is a treasure trove of the thoughts of J. L. Moreno just as he stood on the cusp of originating psychodrama. It contains some of Moreno's most famous utterances and much of his bedrock philosophy. I initially drafted this essay to preface a proposed revised edition of Moreno's book; here, I look back on the horizon of its writing.

Theatre of Spontaneity is a panegyric for spontaneity, improvisation, and process. It unfolds like that of an earlier book Moreno wrote (*Words of the Father*), and in neither book did Moreno confine himself to one field alone. True, *Theatre of Spontaneity* is Moreno's treatise on theater, and what he says about theater anticipates the work of the interactive theater movement by 50 years. *Theatre of Spontaneity* also includes Moreno's early writings on psychology. Readers of this journal will find nascent concepts in the pages of this book—references to the locus and structure of the self, the co-unconscious, the warm-up, and the spontaneity test.

Barely 100 pages long, the book is more a series of pronouncements than an elaborated argument, and it skips readily from one topic to another. Professor René Marineau, Moreno's biographer, has addressed this quality, suggesting that although the book "lacks unity, it contains most of the ingredients of Moreno's philosophy" (p. 81).

In *Theatre of Spontaneity* (1973/1924), Moreno called for the "elimination of the playwright and the written play" (p. a). His position on scripted theater is as radical today as it was when his book was first published in Germany over 80 years ago. Many specifics about the workings of improvisational theater that Moreno discussed in *Theatre of Spontaneity* will be resonant to practitioners of nonscripted approaches—role-play theater, theater in education (T. I. E.), Theatre of the Oppressed, theater for development, and playback

theater. Moreno championed the actor as more than a reciter—and the audience as more than a receptor—of given lines.

He also decried what he called the “vanquished reality” of received culture (p. 5). He exhorted all present, including actors and auditors, to become “spontaneously creative selves,” (p. 18). That is a position that places considerable faith in human beings. Moreno called on his readers to find in themselves acceptance for spontaneity’s twin, the “unwanted child” of imperfection (p. 46). In this regard, Moreno anticipated Peter Brook, the British director, who, in his 1968 book *The Empty Space*, gave recognition to the “rough and holy” theater.

Moreno belonged to the turn-of-the-century Viennese intelligentsia, to the circle that believed in the act of *as if* that is the heart of fantasy (Freud and his followers stood squarely against that). In creating his concept of therapeutic theater described in these pages, Moreno argued for the liberating effect of the “true second time” as experienced on the psychodrama stage (p. 91). He adumbrated his controversial view of privacy, arguing that the therapeutic drama should include the “entire” community, “our mothers and fathers, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors” (p. 28). This was a preliminary proposition not only for family therapy but also for a community-focused healing ritual that remains urgent in our posttraditional culture.

In a later revised edition of *Theatre of Spontaneity*, Moreno alluded to the history of his own theater work, first in Vienna, Austria, through the early 1920s, then in New York after his emigration. Convening a group of actors in 1921 was one of the many nonscientific activities that absorbed this young doctor (another was the literary magazine *Daimon*, published in Vienna, 1918). The members of the acting group called themselves the *Stegreiftheater* (*Theatre of Spontaneity*) and were committed to scriptless performances [*stegreif*—extemporaneous, off the cuff, impromptu]. Moreno complained that when the improvisation did not go so well, the audience said, “I told you so!” and that when it was successful, they did not believe that it was spontaneous. One of Moreno’s core *Stegreif* experiences—the April 1 (1921) performance in which he called for a new king—was generally considered a failure, but it comes down to us as the first sociodrama.

Some of Moreno’s actors went on to become famous in traditional theater and film. Among them were Peter Lorre in Hollywood and Elizabeth Bergner in Germany. Moreno’s reconstituted Impromptu Theater in New York, staged in rented studios in Carnegie Hall, included J. J. Robbins, who was later to translate Constantin Stanislavski’s *My Life in Art*, and Helen Jennings, the young sociologist who was to become Moreno’s close collaborator.

One of the ways the *Stegreiftheater* tried to impress audiences was to act out improvisationally the news of the day. Moreno called that approach the Living Newspaper. In the introduction to his *Theatre* book, he distinguishes his approach to the living newspaper from the already well-known postrevo-

lutionary Russian practice of delivering news to the illiterate through dramatization. According to Moreno, the living newspaper was “not a recitation; life itself is enacted” (p. 79).

The *Stegreiftheater* and Impromptu Theater experiments became fertile ground for Moreno’s evolving ideas about what would later emerge as psychodrama. However, the famous account of his action treatment of one of his actors (the story of “Barbara”) was not included in *Theatre of Spontaneity*, nor was a detailed description of how Moreno’s improvisation worked. One can assume that Moreno gave the actors their provocations (thus a considerable responsibility for the success of the scenes would devolve on him as director). Despite his emphasis on an active audience, he did not rely on the audience to suggest scenes, as is common in modern forms of improvisation.

There is a fascinating passage in a pamphlet that accompanied the Carnegie Hall performances, the 1931 *Impromptu*, in which A. B. W. Smith, listed as a “dramatic critic,” described as follows the short intervals between the company’s improvised scenes:

And yet even the casual onlooker is deeply struck by the Impromptu psychological analyses which the doctor demonstrates in the short intervals between the plays. He places any willing person from the audience in an imagined situation, and from the conduct of that person in that situation he draws certain conclusions as to the various patterns of the individual before him. (p. 7)

I imagine that Moreno’s charisma and insight made those interludes an early kind of spontaneity test of compelling interest—more engaging, perhaps, than what was produced by his improvisers. At any rate, Moreno later dropped his spontaneity theater for the “happier solution” of psychodrama. René Marineau put it as follows in the French edition of his Moreno biography:

Au fond de l’âme, Moreno era thérapeute et ses expériences de théâtre ne le comblent pas totalement. [At heart, Moreno was a therapist and his theatre experiments did not fully add up.] (p. 196)

The most recently revised edition, published in 1973, is the third. The book originally appeared anonymously, in a German language edition of 1924, as one of Moreno’s European monographs, after *Das Testament des Vaters* and *Der Königsroman*. The second edition was published in the United States in 1947, and it was this English language version that was fully reworked by Moreno, including passages extolling the success of *Stegreiftheater* on both sides of the Atlantic.

The most interesting difference between the first edition and the second concerns the principal categories of the book’s organization. The categories of the original German *Stegreiftheater* included “theater,” “theater of spontaneity,” and a heading called “Weihetheater [theater of consecration].” That final heading was cut from the revised *Theatre of Spontaneity* in favor of “theater of the cre-

ator,” and a new heading was added called the “therapeutic theater.” It is also of interest that eight pages of *inter-action* diagrams in the original edition were reduced to one page in the revision. These diagrammatic charts are reminiscent of the later movement diagrams of another German émigré, Rudolph Laban, who became influential in the field of creative drama. In Moreno’s case, the action diagrams served to record the interrelationships of figures in the drama.

The third edition of *Theatre of Spontaneity* appeared shortly before Moreno’s death in 1974. It had been enlarged to include a commentary by Moreno on an essay about Goethe and psychodrama and a new foreword referring to developments in experimental theater. Subsequent efforts to reissue *Theatre of Spontaneity* have not as yet reached fruition.

Without doubt, Moreno’s genius resided in his skill as a psychodramatist and sociometrist. Although he used the medium of print to record his ideas, he did not have the patience or the inclination for sustained literary achievement. He was not meticulous, his focus was not always clear, and he was an indefatigable self-promoter.

Nevertheless, Moreno spelled out his core ideas about spontaneity and group process in writing *Theatre of Spontaneity*. Reading and rereading it inspires us. It is also exciting to know that he raised this clarion call to action so many years ago.

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