Historical Archives

The Psychodrama Television Show that Never Was

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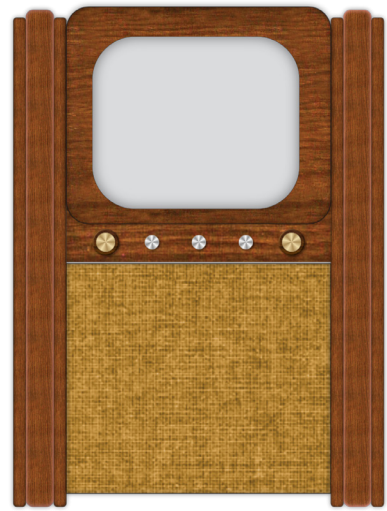

On October 26, 1949, a young film and television producer from Vanguard Productions in New York named Mort Abrahams wrote a letter to J.L. Moreno addressed to his office at 101 Park Avenue. "Dear Dr. Moreno," he wrote, "I would like to thank you for the pleasant and interesting evening I spent with your group last Monday.… Of course, I was rather unhappy about the fact that you are not interested in television at this time. It had been my feeling that a television program, seen by millions of people, would be an ideal medium for the further dissemination of your program of mass therapy." Assuring him that the program would be "handled with the utmost tact and the highest ethical principles," Abrahams demonstrated an appreciation for J.L.'s views: "Suppose the home audiences were to react to the improvizations [sic] in the same manner as your theater audiences?... Is there not every reason to believe, Dr. Moreno, that every living room in the nation might not be a potential psychodramatic theatre for one hour each week?"[1]

Building his argument, Abrahams noted the popularity of "This is Show Business", a CBS program that had just debuted earlier that year and was the first television show broadcast from coast to coast. It was obvious that television was

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the hot medium, with affluent postwar Americans buying TV sets as quickly as manufacturers could turn them out. Six million American homes had television sets in 1950; by 1960 there were ten times as many. For what would come to be known as "the tube" the only way was up.[2]

Abrahams was clearly frustrated and non-plussed at this cool reception by the dynamic and theatrical Moreno who clearly loved the spotlight. He must have seen in J.L. a tireless promotor of his ideas. Perhaps J.L. regaled him of his long record of interest in new communications technologies, beginning with the "radio-film" audio technology that in effect paid for his travel from Vienna to New York in 1925. Ten years before that 1945 monograph, he created his Therapeutic Motion Pictures company to film role-training exercises at the Hudson Training School for Girls. In the monograph he notes that "a psychodramatic film was produced by the author in collaboration with Mr. S. Bates of Hudson, N.Y.," and presented at the American Psychiatric meetings in 1935. His filmic efforts continued with short demonstrations of psychodramatic interventions (now with sound) in the 1940s. Some of these efforts may be viewed on the Internet.[3]

J.L. was sure that he had something original to contribute to the medium. In that 1945 monograph he wrote critically of "the legion of mediocre playwrights, radio and film script writers…. A psychodramatist on the consulting board of film production agencies might render good service…." He goes on to recommend that "*therapeutic* motion pictures, film or television, the selection of conflicts, the construction of plots, the choice of training and cast, must be made in accord with psychodramatic principles." (Emphasis in original). The production must be designed so that the "s. factor," spontaneity, is stimulated in the entire creative process, not only the writer but also the audience. Sometimes it will be necessary to "project the psychodramatic director, as he enters upon the stage and give his comments in the interludes, if not in persona, at least as a voice, into the film picture itself."[4] That director would, no doubt, be J.L. himself.

J.L. frequently took the opportunity to mention the limitations of psychoanalysis. In this case, the problem was the way that psychoanalysis draws from one particular situation, the psychoanalytic one, to generalize to other situations, such as drama, that are structurally different. It seems unlikely that the conventions of psychoanalysis could be related to the drama in the way that J.L. envisioned. Nor did Freud himself take any interest in popular culture; his special disdain for movies is well known, including an incident where he declined to consult on a film despite being offered $100,000, an astronomical sum in the 1920s.[5] By contrast, in the words of Graham Lazar, "that would have been an easy choice for Moreno" who was always looking for a way to communicate his ideas.[6]

All considered, as an ambitious entrepreneur and innovator at the peak of his career at age 60, this red-carpeted invitation should have been hard to resist. Yet there is no record of J.L. accepting Abrahams' entreaties. Why not?

The answer could be as simple as personality: something about Abrahams rubbed J.L. the wrong way. But I think a more substantive answer is that he never wanted to cede control to another director. There could only be one director of

a psychodrama in which J.L. was involved, and that, again, was J.L. himself. This would be a recurring obstacle to the production of psychodrama on a mass scale, unless of course J.L. were to create his own movie or television company, which was the motivation for Therapeutic Motion Pictures. Scaling up to play in the same ballpark with the film or television industry was never in the cards.

As for Mort Abrahams, who died in 2009, he joined the parade from New York to Los Angeles in the 1950s and enjoyed a successful career producing such television shows as The Man from U.N.C.L.E. and such films as The Planet of the Apes.[7] Sadly, neither spies nor other primates were ever protagonists in an Abrahams psychodramatic production.

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Special thanks to Sergio Guimaraes, who took the initiative to upload brief fragments of J.L. in didactic mode from the J.L. Moreno Collection at the Countway Library of Medicine.

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