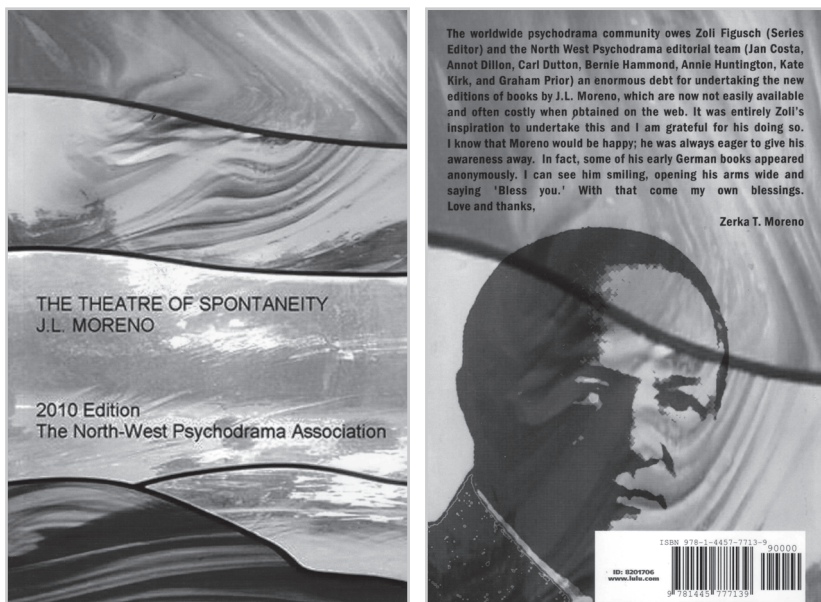


Book Reviews



The Theatre of Spontaneity (2010 Edition)

By J.L. Moreno

The North-West Psychodrama Association

2010

Original German 'Das Stegreiftheater' published anonymously 1923

by Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, Potsdam, Germany

Original English translation by J.L. Moreno published 1947 in the USA by Beacon

House, New York, followed by two revised and enlarged editions 1973 and 1983

Reviewed by Christian Penny

The American philosopher Hubert Dreyfus argues that Christ was a *reconfigurer*, one of those rare beings who is not *rearticulating* the thinking of those who have gone before him, but rather, is presenting to the world a new vision. A vision so new, and hence so radical, it is almost incomprehensible.

Reading 'The Theatre of Spontaneity', I am struck by a similar dimension in Moreno's offering. It is almost Christ like in its proportions, to say nothing of its subversiveness. "The centre of my thesis" he argues, "is neither the problem or question of the existence of god but the origin, reality and expansion of the self" (p.21).

Shot through with this transformative zeal, it is the work of an astute and gifted seeker. The struggle, which this book seeks to articulate, is Moreno's search for a vehicle that can carry forward his vision. Lying somewhere between science (psychiatry) and art (theatre), he is ardently pursuing a form that will liberate our greatest and most underdeveloped gift, spontaneity.

Moreno's careful analysis of the functioning of the contemporary theatre, much unchanged to this day, reveals his fluency with the practices and innovations of his times. He correctly links Stanislavski with Freud as opponents of true spontaneity. He describes the conventional theatre as "at its best, dedicated to the worship of the dead ... a sort of resurrection cult" (p.30).

His theatre, a spontaneity theatre, will overthrow all of the conserves that are introduced by the process of beginning with a playwright, and by the actor interpreting and then rehearsing for performance the work of the playwright. "When I entered the theatre I knew it had strayed from its primordial form" Moreno proclaims (p.17). His theatre "is a theatre of all and for all" (p.43).

The core difference between the legitimate theatre and the theatre of spontaneity is the relationship to the *moment*. Where the legitimate theatre attempts to present its moments to an audience as finished creations, perfecting them and killing them in the process, the theatre of spontaneity presents the moment as a blend of creation, form and content all at once. Fully alive. "I permitted, even encouraged, imperfection in order to attain total spontaneity" (p.12).

Moreno knows that the legitimate theatre cannot tolerate this goal, tied as it is to the need to be perfectly performed. He needs new methods of production. He initially hopes that the living newspaper will provide the platform, an enactment of the day's news transformed by players in order to become meaningful and relevant to a watching audience. The attempt fails. He cannot overcome the prejudices of his audiences or train his performers, I imagine, to the skill level such an ambitious initiative requires.

These struggles lead Moreno to the therapeutic theatre, a more forgiving platform and one that he acknowledges probably saved the development of the spontaneity principle. In this forum the work of performance, with its inherent and encouraged flaws, is more readily accepted. Here Moreno describes elements of what is clearly becoming the psychodramatic stage as we know it today. And it is here that he is particularly eloquent. Describing its effect he instructs "Here emerges the theatre in its deepest sense, because the most treasured secrets violently resist being touched and exposed" (p.99). Clarifying the very nature of re-enactment he notes "... this unfoldment of life in the domain of illusion does not work like a renewal of suffering rather it confirms the rule: every *true* second time is a liberation from the first" (p.101).

How true. How succinct. How precise.

The final chapters deal with the meta-philosophical drives behind the investigation, particularly the relationship of creation and play to the god principle, and some short academic reviews.

Reading Moreno's work, I realise the degree to which my own investigations into aliveness in the theatre have been assisted by my experiences on different psychodramatic stages. I have pursued a drama that carries the gripping quality that I have experienced on these stages, one that enrolls or involves its audience through the event, one that warms up its audience to its role and significance, a work that, as it evolves, makes a significant impact on the participating group. But this goal is constantly at odds with the predetermined drives of the conventional theatre.

As Moreno points out, the process of reinterpreting the vision of the playwright will always lead to some degree of conserve. The performance will struggle to be a true discovery of what matters now. It risks becoming another material act and joining the three other great forces of materialism, "The economic materialism of Marx, the psychological realism of Freud, and the technological materialism of the steamboat, plane and atomic bomb" (p.18). "All have a deep fear and disrespect, almost a hatred of the creative self" he concludes (p.18).

And it is here that we see the degree to which Moreno has contemplated the very nature of the dramatic or theatrical act. He is a progenitor, in many ways, to a whole range of theatre investigations that followed later in the century and carry on today. For example, Peter Brook's and Jerry Grotowski's investigations into the nature of embodied performance and the relationship of performance to audience. And later Fox's creation of the New York Playback Theatre Company in upstate New York, an improvised community theatre where the audience tell their stories (news) and these are improvised on the spot.

And most recently here in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, where I live.

I attended a version of this playback theatre form under the direction of a local psychodrama practitioner, Bev Hosking. The same group of audience members and performers gathered for three consecutive Tuesdays to share stories, spurred on by what we were reading in the news. As the community developed, so did the spontaneity of performers and audience members alike. We experienced our lives connected to our worlds, both through the telling of the stories and through the enactments.

The latest edition of Moreno's living newspaper . . .