Book Reviews

Impromptu Man: J L Moreno and the origins of Psychodrama, Encounter Culture, and the Social Network

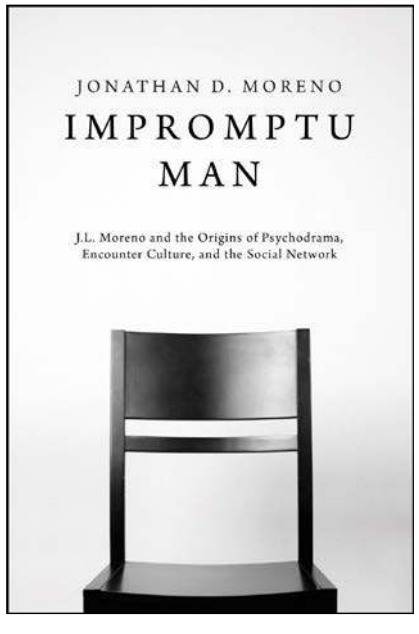
by Jonathon D. Moreno
2014. Bellevue Literary Press.

Reviewed by Peter Howie

Ever since I began reading this book I wanted to write a review saying:

"Get it, read it, love it!"

Succinct certainly has its place and that may be enough for some.
For others, here is an extended version of 'get it, read it, and love it'…



This book is biography, but biography of the ideas and dreams as well as the man Jacob Levy Moreno, who is referred to affectionately throughout the book as JL. The book is written by JL's youngest child Jonathan. Jonathan D. Moreno was around JL as a child during the 1950s and 1960s, at conferences and presentations, and hung out as a child with many historical figures, for instance Margaret Mead, who was a friend of JL. Since that time Jonathan (I lovingly use his Christian name as I have been journeying with him for many days now) has had a distinguished academic career and is currently, at the University Pennsylvania, where he is a Penn Integrates Knowledge university professor, and also Professor of Medical Ethics and Health Policy, of History and Sociology of Science, and of Philosophy. Think that's impressive? Amongst his earlier books is *The Body Politic: The Battle Over Science in America*, named a Best Book of 2011 by Kirkus Reviews. Among his other books are *Mind Wars: Brain Research and the Military in the 21st Century*,

and *Undue Risk: Secret State Experiments on Humans*. You can find out more about him in www.medicalethics.med.upenn.edu/people/faculty or through google. He has a Wiki page, and, lets face it, in true Moreno style he has to be more interesting than his creation! Try this interview with him about the book: www.soundcloud.com/whyy-public-media/jonathan-morenos-impromptu-man. Having just started out on an academic-like path, I am in awe of what he has created and produced in his highly productive and still creative life.

The book follows JL and his creations from his earliest days and adds in a variety of other biographical information that wasn't in Rene Marineau's valuable biography. It is written in an easy style that keeps me wanting more. Indeed when I came near to the end I was sincerely hoping I was only halfway through. I found myself greatly enjoying not only the historical presentations of JL, psychodrama, the theories, the people, the situations, the times, the milieux, the spin-offs, the rip-offs, the fights, the challenges, the delights, the failures, the successes, but I found great joy in the analysis provided by Jonathon, given greater weight by his physical proximity to much of what he wrote.

I found Jonathon's writing about the times and JL both loving and critical. There is something else about Jonathon saying JL "retained the personal style of a mystic and an impresario, characteristics that were to prove both provocative and troublesome in the years ahead" (Location 205 Kindle version) and, about comparing JL with Kurt Lewin as a spokespersons for the new science of group dynamics they were forging, makes this comment that JL " … was handicapped by his eccentric and bombastic manner …" (Location 2872 Kindle version). This is done in such a manner that I found it entirely acceptable, even loving. Many authors have written similar things and maybe, perhaps, to distance themselves from such an eccentric, or perhaps from his followers and protégés. In this work it reads as a thoroughly acceptable reflection on a man who struggled with his own ebullience and resisted modifying himself sufficiently to make it in the mainstream.

This book exposes psychodrama's influence on a generation of group developers and therapists – the encounter movement, humanistic psychology, and many others, along with a variety of other social movements taking place sat the time, right up to Social Network Analysis. It is a meaty book and I can find places already where I will be able to quote it in my next piece of writing. I recommend it as a central text.