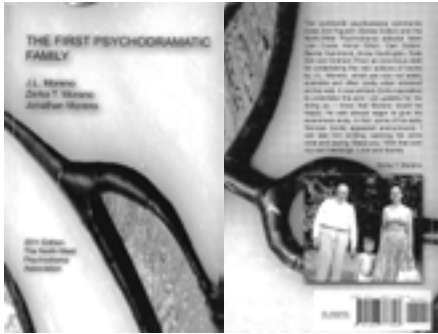


# Book Reviews



## ***The First Psychodramatic Family* (2011 Edition)**

By J.L. Moreno, Zerka T. Moreno  
and Jonathan Moreno

The North-West Psychodrama  
Association, UK

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Reviewed by Penny Beran

*The First Psychodramatic Family* was first published in 1964 as No. 40 in the Psychodrama and Group Psychotherapy Monograph Series. The authors were J.L., Zerka and Jonathan Moreno. Biographer Rene Marineau (1989:140) describes the work as “the very personal account of the use of psychodrama in Moreno’s own family”. This 2011 edition is published by the North-West Psychodrama Association with Zerka Moreno’s permission and blessing.

At the beginning of *The First Psychodramatic Family*, an explanatory note suggests that this is a poetic and aesthetic story. Historical accuracy is not the aim. I returned to this statement each time I became aware of an inconsistency. As I read the book it occurred to me that there could be several lenses through which to view the notion of the first psychodramatic family. I recommend that you read these anecdotes and narratives as if coming to Moreno and his family for the first time — in *this* moment.

The opening segment prepares the reader to meet the first psychodramatic family. Do we not do this each time we are present in a psychodrama session, as a protagonist, a member of the group, as auxiliary, as director? The family on the stage is there in this moment, in this way. We experience this scene for the first time. We experience this family for the first time. Each of many moments is a first time for this family. But this is perhaps a wayward interpretation and, referring to the book’s title, Moreno really did mean that there will always be but one first family. For Moreno, his family is forever the first psychodramatic family. “It is

forever first because psychodrama is here forever” (p.9). The chapters and segments that follow reveal how J.L., Zerka and Jonathan used psychodrama within their family, sometimes with a learning outcome for Jonathan and sometimes not as planned, prompting J.L. or Zerka to reflect on the way they used the method.

As I began reading I wondered about the author of each section. Is it J.L., Zerka or Jonathan? Gradually an overview emerged, a way of appreciating the whole of this 136 page book. It is like a collage. There are many carefully selected individual ingredients and their textures and sources vary. The book contains some original writings by Moreno and Zerka, poems, anecdotes, facsimiles in the form of extracts from professional journals, newspaper articles, photographs and drawings. As with a collage, the viewer can stand back and take in the whole picture or choose to zoom in on one element for further exploration.

The structure of the book creates a loose chronological path for J.L., Zerka and Jonathan and the three together as the family. It starts with J.L.’s birth (or the myth thereof), through his time in Vienna, migration to the USA, meeting Zerka, the birth of Jonathan, professional work at St. Elizabeth and Beacon, establishing the first psychodrama stage in America, visits to Russia, a return visit to Vienna and his meeting with Roosevelt. Interspersed with records of events are reflections on war such as “Can you tell me Doctor Jonathan How we can prevent the next world war?” (p.70); sociograms of the sociometric influences among school children; the advent of *The Living Newspaper*; the invitation to J.L. and his decision not to become a USA state senator; what Freud actually said in response to J.L.; the relationship between psychoanalysis and psychodrama — psychodrama “will step out and take over” from inside the Trojan Horse of psychoanalysis (p.101); commentary on Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and the existentialists.

J.L. Moreno wrote letters to various participants involved in the Eichmann trials in 1961. He made recommendations to the Israeli court as to how to carry out and conclude their trial so that “the true and hidden experiences are brought before the conscience of the world” (p.103). J.L.’s dialogue with Thespis, the reputed inventor of Greek tragedy, illuminates the study of theatre, the development of psychodrama and the role of the protagonist as the one who agonises for the audience. The dialogue uses Arthur Miller’s *After the Fall* as the vehicle for discussion.

Zerka’s poems are self-disclosing regarding the impact of the loss of her arm and her hospitalisation for other ailments. She does not sound sorry for herself and yet I glean a sadness and grief. Her poems of Jonathan’s early years have a spirited lightness and clarity. The poems about her and J.L. introducing Jonathan to the psychodramatic ways of seeing the world, relationships and experiences are entertaining and informative. At the dinner table the child Jonathan role reverses with his mother to become “not only his own therapist, but the therapist of his mother as well” (p.79). At school he replies to the teacher’s query as to what his father does. “He mends broken women!” (p.69). At other times Jonathan

is the double, the godhead, the mirror.

The purported megalomaniac aspect of J.L.'s character is displayed in riddles and paradoxes. His megalomania is known well "but the legend of his modesty is little known" (p.13). He had published anonymously. Others took his ideas. He fought to prove his authorship. He claimed that "ideas, once they are born, belong to the universe, and no one has the right to buy and sell them on market; they belong to universality" (p.14). Anecdotes throughout the book reveal a more strident expression of authorship of one's own life. "We will never give up our expectations to become the centre and ruler of the world ... At the end of time there will be I, the creator of the world" (p.24).

The title of the book provides many points from which to launch further exploration of Moreno, his family, the psychodramatic method and the development of the use of the method in the context of historical circumstances. The efficacy of the therapeutic theatre can hardly be stated more movingly and powerfully than as "the vehicle for transformation from an irreversible to a reversible universe" (p.21). "There are certain moments when we have to halt the flow of the worthlessness of life and call a stop to the stupidity of being dead while alive" (p.42). J.L. knew the challenge required for spontaneity to flourish and that can encourage us to also rise to the occasion. "Whenever I enter a situation which requires psychodramatic treatment I ostensibly undergo a 'transformation'. I feel disturbed, uneasy, as if trying to live up to the challenge of the moment and to the greatest expectations of the group" (p.43).

Many of us involved with psychodrama are curious in some way about Moreno and his family. My father was born in Vienna in the same year that Moreno rented the space for the theatre of spontaneity, the Stegreiftheater, and my mother the year after. Both my mother's and father's parents lived in the same district of Vienna as Moreno's family. So I feel quite a connection with the background, culture and circumstances of Moreno's European life. I have a fantasy that my grandfather himself might have wandered into the Stegreiftheater.

Marineau's 1989 biography of Jacob Levy Moreno complements the Moreno family's own writings. He explores the legends and myths of Moreno's birth and childhood. "Moreno, it is important to remember, was the first name of Jacob's father. In a way ... Jacob did establish a new dynasty" (p.10). *The First Psychodramatic Family* confirms this in many ways. Venture forth into this Alice In Wonderland to see how.

## REFERENCE

Marineau, R.F. (1989). *Jacob Levy Moreno 1889-1974: Father of Psychodrama, Sociometry, and Group Psychotherapy*. Tavistock/Routledge, London & New York.

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