



## Impromptu (2010 Edition)

Edited by J.L. Moreno  
The North-West Psychodrama  
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Reviewed by Annette Fisher

In 1973 I 'became' a psychodrama trainee and ever since I have studied, practised and taught the psychodramatic method in my professional and personal life. I have a particular interest in its origins and history because the early seeds, the experiments and research conducted by Dr J.L. Moreno, constitute the foundational elements for those of us who practise psychodrama. As a caretaker of the psychodramatic method, I find *Impromptu* an enlightening archive of his original ideas. The numinous quality that the method offers, its capacity for transformation and Moreno's seminal concepts are found here, as in others of his original texts. These concepts include spontaneity, creativity and the creative genius, human qualities that he first captured in the notion of the 'impromptu state'.

This 2010 publication of *Impromptu*, produced by the UK's North-West Psychodrama Association, is one in a series of republished Moreno texts. In the preface the editorial team states the series' purpose: "To bring Moreno's 'truths' to you the reader thus ensuring his words are not forgotten..." (p.7). The two part structure of the book reflects its genesis as an amalgamation of two editions of the first volume of the magazine *Impromptu*, edited by J.L. Moreno. Part One contains *Impromptu* Volume I, Number 1, published originally in January 1931, while Part Two consists of *Impromptu* Volume I, Number 2, published April 1931. Together, the two parts provide an invaluable record of early thinking and experimental theatre as practised by Moreno in the 1930s. Of the many short papers authored by him and several commentators, I intend here to discuss those which I experienced as the most gratifying and enlivening.

*Impromptu* fully reveals Moreno as the passionate visionary and activist that he was. As I was reading and reviewing the book, I arrived at a deep appreciation of his ability to creatively combine philosophy, psychology and the theatre. Moreno offers impromptu as a method with the potential to increase consciousness and stimulate the development of new creative relationships, enlivened communities and a positive effect on the world. For example in the first article, Ave Creatore, he discusses the central ideas of God and creation. Humanity is strongly advised to stop admiring finished works of art and be wary of the tendency to reproduce and copy. He

suggests instead that creation is the period between a clumsy, bumpy beginning and successful mastery, with all the attempts, road blocks, failures and messiness as part of the creative process in between. Moreno builds on these ideas in a later paper titled *The Creative Act*, where he discusses five characteristics of such an act: the awakening when the unconscious rises up and becomes fixed in the conscious state; the surprise of the unexpected; the difference between impromptu enactment and living enactment; the difference between being a creature and a creator; and unconscious-conscious processes as embodied in mimetic effects. This fifth characteristic means that the creative act is not merely a set psychic condition from the unconscious-conscious processes. It is a flexible and evolving process that begins formless and moves through stages, before the creative act is born. I am deeply touched by this theory of creativity because to me, it gives great hope to humanity. Rather than relying on a 'perfect God' in the heavens, it is possible to rise above life's adversities and be spontaneous creators ourselves. Moreno reminds us that we have the capacity to be playful creators, adventurers and inventors and that imperfection is an element of being a creative human being.

In another article, *The New Name*, Moreno describes the way in which he draws his ideas from the arts, the writer, the artist and the painter. Each draft of a play or each stage of a painting is to be appreciated and celebrated because focusing on the finished work alone leads to rigidity. Play is thus an antidote to perfection and stultification. In the paper, *Concerning Perfection*, Moreno concludes that, "Our tendency is to depreciate the experience of adventure in lauding the product" (p.17). He expands on the importance of the artist/actor/poet warming up to situations and finding fluency from within (*The Impromptu State*). As a reader, I link impromptu to two of the core principles of psychodrama as we understand it today, spontaneity and creativity.

Commentator Robert Muller (*The Impromptu Theatre in Vienna*) notes that in the canon of early psychology theorists, J.L. Moreno's theory of creativity adds a fresh view of humanity and new possibilities in human development. In diverting from Freud's theories and the trend to focus on dysfunction and the curing of symptoms and trauma, Moreno envisages impromptu as a therapeutic device, an activist reversal of psychoanalysis and a curative means to organise civilization. In her paper in Part One of *Impromptu* (*Experiments in Impromptu Analysis*), psychologist Helen Jennings discusses the application of psychodrama in psychoanalysis. She argues that impromptu assists the individual to detach from a single focus and learn to move between different foci. This kind of exploration allows for personality analysis and better opportunities in treatment. By the time she writes her contribution to Part Two (*Psychoanalysis and Dr. Moreno*), Helen Jennings comes to the conclusion that, "Psychoanalysis and Impromptu are as water is to fire" (p.65). Whereas impromptu taps the springs of productivity and releases the creative, psychoanalysis has an extinguishing effect.

In addition to presenting Moreno's notions of impromptu and creativity as psychological aspects of human functioning, the book provides a description of

the birth and emergence of the exploratory impromptu theatre itself. The first performance of an impromptu play on “the English-speaking stage” (p.51) was held on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1931 at the Guild Theatre in New York (The Inauguration of Impromptu). In a piece titled *The Poet in Impromptu*, J.J. Robbins discusses his experience as a reviewer and member of the audience at one such production. As he describes the play, it becomes clear to me that the poet who performs without a script in current time is what we would call today the protagonist. He is active rather than passive, in the process of becoming. The players in the enactment are also script free and unrehearsed and respond to the poet from their own abilities and experiences. We know these actors as auxiliaries in today’s psychodramatic production. The connections between impromptu theatre and contemporary playback theatre are also revealed in these descriptions.

My training as an artist has taught me that to be an artist one must stand on the shoulders of the artists who went before. A trained eye can see when the history of the predecessors is not imbedded within the artist’s work. Much current psychotherapy denies its origins or disregards the influence and importance of founders and the historical stepping stones to present day practice. Without drawing from the masters and mistresses we are delivering a mere shadow of possibilities and our practice may lack depth and breadth. The noticeable links between Moreno’s early experiments in impromptu, as revealed in this book and current psychodrama practice thus stands out for me. As a psychodramatist, it is satisfying to know that we have built well on our inspirational foundations. Moreno provided the concepts and a springboard that has resulted in psychodrama practitioners continuing to teach and train others in this philosophy and method. Furthermore, many of his ideas and practices have seeped into other therapies.

In reviewing this book I have been challenged, reading and re-reading the essays to gain deeper insights into the psychodrama method that I practise. I worry that I have not done justice to J.L., knowing that the next time I read these articles I will have a few more ‘light bulb’ moments. I will then say to myself, “I did not fully understand that when I wrote the review!” What I deeply appreciate about *Impromptu* is the way that it reveals Moreno’s tenacity as he struggled to combine the creative arts with the practice of psychology. When I am producing a psychodrama session and the poet, producer and therapist are as one within me, the protagonist, the auxiliaries, the group members and the producer are uplifted and transformed. Unfortunately the wider world has seen a full swing towards the rational and the scientific. In light of this swing, my hope is that readers of *Impromptu* will be reminded of the fullness of J.L. Moreno’s legacy and apply its richness to their professional practices and their lives.

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