

Spontaneity as a Catalyst for Inner Change. The Impact of Psychodrama and Drama Therapy

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Abstract: Dramatic play and storytelling form the foundation of drama therapy and psychodrama, with roots in the ritualistic and theatrical practices of ancient cultures. Over the past century, experimental theater laboratories have emerged, transforming the tools of *mise-en-scène* into therapeutic instruments, and psychodrama employs theatrical techniques such as role reversal, the alter ego, role-playing, and simulation. Both forms of therapy focus on the impact of catharsis, the dynamics of the present, and the importance of the “here and now” moment, with all its personal, social, and cultural implications, facilitating spontaneous creative encounters. These creative therapies provide a unique framework for emotional healing, allowing participants to explore and discover themselves in a safe environment, cultivating profound psychological transformations. J. L. Moreno raises the question: “What if the universe is driven solely by change and spontaneity?” views the concepts of change and spontaneity as key in understanding the universe. What does a transformative journey beginning at the intersection of drama and therapy look like?

Keywords: Jacob L. Moreno, Psychodrama, spontaneity, Laboratory Theatre, creativity.

I. Introduction: Theatre between Artistic Laboratories and Contemporary Forms of Therapy

Ritualized theater in ancient times, bearing the marks of myth, through its stories, provided space for psychological processes, offering the opportunity for self-reflection to both actors and spectators. Citizens of Ancient Greece participated in tragic dramas that exposed fundamental themes

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of life: guilt, justice, suffering, and destiny. Participation in such dramatic performances was more than an aesthetic experience; it was a form of collective introspection, an opportunity to reflect on the human condition, as well as to articulate the relationship with divinity and the forces of nature. This legacy has been passed down to the present day, influencing not only the development of theater, which has generated a series of laboratories and experiments, but also contemporary forms of therapy, especially in the field of art therapy. What began as a collective manifestation of the relationship with the divine and the cosmos has now transformed into a powerful tool for personal exploration and healing

The theater of the 20th and 21st centuries has been profoundly influenced by the achievements of group psychotherapy, psychodrama, and drama therapy, particularly through the way these therapeutic forms have reconceptualised theater art as a space for inner transformation and collective healing, a space where art and psychology merge to create a profoundly transformative experience. Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, Alejandro Jodorovski, Augusto Boal, Ivana Chubbuck, are just a few of those who have established a series of experimental laboratories where both the actor and the spectator transform the means of *mise-en-scène* into therapeutic tools. Actors and directors intentionally use drama and its associated techniques to achieve therapeutic goals such as: eliminating certain symptoms, treating traumas, emotional and physical integration, personal development, resolving relational and identity issues concerning oppressed and marginalised social groups, domestic violence, human trafficking. These influences have led to a redefinition of contemporary theater as a space not only for entertainment but also for social and psychological intervention. Often, interactive performances are proposed, where the barrier between stage and audience dissolves. In these performances, actors and spectators meet on the same level of dialogue and power, without antagonism between the hall and the stage, creating an overlap. The role of the actor is symbolic of the human search for self and freedom of expression, with the actor serving as an instrument in Greek theatre, the voice of the playwright, a star, until making their own voice heard through these laboratories.

II. Moreno and the Art of Transformation: The Intersection of Theatre and Psychodrama

Conversely, from theatre to psychology, a notable example in this direction is the method of psychodrama, developed by Jacob L. Moreno¹, born in Romania, which has had a profound influence on how theatrical techniques are used for therapeutic purposes. Moreno, considered one of the pioneers of group therapy (1920-1930), created a space where participants could enact or re-enact life experiences through role playing. Instead of a traditional theatrical setting, the therapy environment is often designed as an open stage where participants can take on new identities and roles. The setting allows individuals to explore their thoughts and emotions in a safe and protected environment. The transformation of *mise-en-scène* into a therapeutic tool was fuelled by the idea that the theatrical experience is more than just an aesthetic process; it is a platform for understanding and changing human behaviours. Many of the techniques developed in these theatrical laboratories were later integrated into clinical practice, providing therapists with new tools, especially through the use of drama therapy and psychodrama. Psychodrama is defined by Moreno as the science that explores "truth" through dramatic methods². It deals with interpersonal relationships and particular worlds. The psychodramatic method primarily uses five tools – the stage, the subject as actor, the director, the therapeutic aides or auxiliary egos, and the audience³. The use of improvisational acting, role exploration, or reinterpretation of life scenarios has proven to be extremely useful for patients. The focus is on catharsis, the dynamics of the present, the importance of the “here and now” moment, creativity, and spontaneity.

¹ Jacob Levy Moreno (1889–1974) was a Romanian-Austrian psychiatrist, sociologist, and artistic innovator, considered the founder of psychodrama, sociometry, and modern group therapy. Renowned for his revolutionary approach, Moreno used theatre as a therapeutic tool to explore emotions, interpersonal relationships, and processes of personal transformation. His vision of spontaneity and creativity profoundly influenced the fields of psychology and expressive therapy.

² J. L. Moreno, *Fundamental Writings: On Psychodrama, Group Method, and Spontaneity*, edited by Simona Reghintovschi, translated by Ioana Maria Novac (Bucharest: Trei Publishing House, 2024), 47.

³ Ibid.

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Moreno raised the following topic for discussion: “Why not discuss teaching psychodrama to actors?” He aimed for actors to fully immerse themselves in their roles in theatre, and become deeply aware of them, and at the same time teach people in other professions to free themselves from the rigid roles in the “theatre of life,” helping them rediscover the joy of being authentic. Unlike Konstantin Stanislavski's system, which most actors study and apply and which proposes an external working method, Moreno suggested an internal one. When asked once, “Doctor, do you disagree with Stanislavski?” he replied that he did not, explaining: “Stanislavski would say: Bend your leg and be old. I come and say: Feel like an old man, feel the age you are, feel how you are, and your legs will bend by themselves.” Stanislavski was concerned with “as if,” while Moreno was concerned with “what is,” with “being.”⁴ In theatre, the audience cries, not the actor; the actor learns to control their emotions, they cannot be overwhelmed by them, nor can they be absorbed by what is happening on stage because they have to pay attention to many details, such as the set, lighting, fellow actors, and stage movement.

III. Panta Rhei: Spontaneity as a Creative and Therapeutic Process in Theatre and Psychodrama

J. L. Moreno challenged traditional paradigms of thought with his fundamental question: “What if the universe were governed solely by change and spontaneity?”⁵ For Moreno, change is an inevitable constant, a phenomenon that affects all aspects of life and the universe. This concept finds its roots in Heraclitean philosophy, according to which “everything flows” (*panta rhei*), and nothing remains unchanged. In psychodrama, change is seen not only as an inevitable process but as a force that can be creatively channeled and explored. Change is no longer just something that happens externally; it becomes an active process in which individuals engage. Moreno believed that a deep understanding of change offers us the opportunity to become active agents of our own lives, not just passive in the face of circumstances. In Moreno's universe, change is closely linked to the evolution of human identity.

⁴ Craig E. Stephenson, *Jung and Moreno. Essays on the Theatre of Human Nature*, translated by Mariana Alexandru, proofread by Camelia Maria Cupşa (Bucharest: Atman Publishing House, 2018), 29.

⁵ Moreno, *Fundamental Writings: On Psychodrama, Group Method, and Spontaneity*, 45.

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Instead of being constrained by fixed identities or past traumas, Moreno invited us to see identity as a dynamic, fluid, and continuously transforming process. People are not defined by a single role or experience but by their ability to navigate multiple roles and life situations. Constant change thus becomes not only an inevitable characteristic of existence but also a source of power and personal growth.

Regarding spontaneity, Moreno saw it as a complementary force to change, a vital principle that allows us to adapt to the continuous transformations of the world. In therapy sessions, participants are not limited to automatically recreating the past but are encouraged to respond spontaneously to dramatic scenarios, exploring new ways of thinking and feeling. Spontaneity does not mean impulsive reaction but an ability to act in an authentic, adaptive, and creative manner. In this process, it is observed how spontaneity and change feed each other: change creates the context for spontaneous actions, and these actions, in turn, lead to new forms of change. However, an actor and an individual with another profession relate differently to these two concepts. In fact, how has creativity influenced the actor, and how does he relate to it today?

First of all, Moreno proposed four types of theatre: Theatre of Conflict, Theatre of Spontaneity, Therapeutic Theatre, and Theatre of the Creator, and initially worked only with actors. Generally, the actor takes on the role and the text given by the playwright, which is accepted by their own Ego, and enters the sphere of creativity, keeping some parts of the self and some of the character, depending on how they fit. In conventional theatre, the process of spontaneity happens behind the scenes (as a space) and before the performance (as time); in psychodrama, it is “here and now.” In psychodrama sessions, Moreno invited them to play not only fictional roles but also aspects of their real lives or those of others. They were encouraged to improvise and access their deep emotions, but he noticed that actors tended to use clichés from theatre. He captured the specificity of therapeutic theatre compared to traditional theatre, observing that actors are reluctant to put their personal lives on stage. Moreno then understood that people must want and take responsibility to change their own lives. Change is not comfortable. *Panta rhei* suggests that identity and reality are not fixed but fluid; change is inevitable, but an actor's experiences are different in how they manage this change. While the individual seeks to find meaning and integrate change into their personal

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identity, the actor explores it as a natural part of their creative process. People are afraid of change, Moreno observes, very afraid. Some actors fear stepping out of the theatrical world and embracing their true selves.

With the rise of the Romantic movement, artists in general have correlated art with suffering. A large percentage of painters and writers suffer from mental disorders and addictions.⁶ How was creativity perceived before? If we go back to ancient Greece and Rome, we find that from a distant source, divine spirits helped people create, for reasons not understood. The Greeks had the “daemon” (Socrates had his daemon), the Romans had a “genius,” a magical creature that lived in the walls of the artist, a kind of elf or fairy. One thing is certain: neither were responsible, applauded, or blamed for their art, as there was this psychological construct that protected them, the daemons and fairies, who were either inspired or not. When the “artist became a genius,” anxiety began, the thought “I am not good enough,” and the reputation of artists as mad, alcoholic, drug-addicted, manic-depressive began, with a cloud of fog over their personal lives, wavering in the search for the meaning of life and the purpose of art; a reputation earned through toil and at the cost of many of their lives. The creative process remained something supernatural, inexplicable, transcendent, and manifested in a constant state of striving. “In my kingdom,” says the Red Queen in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, “it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.”⁷ In Romania, although there are no statistics on the matter, we often see actors turning to alcohol and drugs in an attempt to spark their creativity. While this might make them better actors, it also leaves them feeling disconnected, dissociated, anxious, and depressed. Have we misunderstood the creative process? You don't need to be poor, lonely, exhausted, drugged, or alcoholic to succeed or constantly prove yourself in an endless competition with no clear opponent. Creativity is more of a systemic phenomenon than an individual one, said Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. As such, it involves the effort of multiple fields, domains, and people. How can psychodrama help when working with actors? Actors are at a higher risk of losing their sense of self compared to bank clerks. They might forget who they are and who they want to become, despite their

⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, translated by Irina Dinescu (Bucharest: Curtea Veche Publishing, 2023), 96.

⁷ Jordan Peterson, *12 rules of life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Bucharest: Trei Publishing, 2018), 49.

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great capacity for reinvention. Is it necessary for actors to clarify their creativity while in the process of personal change and defining their identity, first as individuals and then as actors?

In J. L. Moreno's perspective, creative spontaneity is one of the cornerstones of the therapeutic process and plays an essential role in identity reconstruction. Moreno believed that spontaneity is a vital energy that allows us to respond in new and creative ways to situations, thereby constantly transforming and adapting ourselves. Through this lens, identity reconstruction is not just a discovery of the authentic self but a continuous creation process, one that enables the individual to be active in their own becoming. The actor is aware of these aspects, practices them, and engages in improvisation. However, as Moreno observed, does the actor use theatrical clichés without authentically working on reconstructing their own identity? Is their search for creativity an external, superficial one?

Conclusion

The way psychodrama has influenced theater and vice versa has added significant value to both fields. While the trends in theater at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century were contrary, shifting from Star Theater to Group Theater, these aspects are now balanced. The star system in France was also a psychological consequence of the audience's search for "brilliant specimens of the species" with whom they could compare themselves, as well as the exaggerated need for celebrity, which developed the cult of the actor to the point of changing the "purpose of art." Sets, costumes, plays written especially for them, appropriate salaries, and societal privileges. On the other hand, in group theater, for example, in the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen's ensemble, an actor's complacency or failure to follow rules quickly relegated them to the background. André Antoine also criticised the concept of star-centered theater, advocating for group-oriented theater. Did this group offer actors protection against the harmful effects of stardom? The emergence of these psychology-based laboratories in theater significantly contributes to the actor's development and protects them from their own

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vulnerabilities. Paul Torrance says, “First, we must seek our true identity, and then recognise the things we truly love and strive to obtain them.”⁸

Moreno states that “Man is an actor,” yet the actor is also a person. What does a transformative journey beginning at the intersection of drama and therapy look like? How might they change when they find themselves at the crossroads of therapy and drama? This transformative journey is a dynamic process, involving not only the healing of emotional wounds but also a deep exploration of how change and the present moment can become forces of personal creation and transformation. Through drama therapy and psychodrama, the individual learns to reinterpret their past, embrace the present, and look to the future with a sense of limitless possibilities. For actors, psychodrama is useful because it encourages them to explore and express real emotions, not just mimic and imitate them. Through role-playing and interpreting different aspects of their own lives, actors gain a better understanding of their own motivations and reactions. This self-knowledge allows them to bring more authenticity and nuance to their creations. This gives actors the opportunity to explore various types of relationships. One of the elements of psychodramatic methodology is related to the concept of spontaneity and encounter. Tele⁹, a concept proposed by Moreno, defines a flow of mutual empathy that enables people in an encounter to truly meet and feel understood in their most authentic selves. This encounter, known as a tele process, is characterised by reciprocity. Additionally, catharsis represents the emotional release that can provide actors with psychological relief and emotional clarity.

Creative spontaneity, within Moreno’s psychodrama, represents the essence of identity reconstruction. It allows individuals to break free from rigid roles and limiting thought patterns, paving the way for authentic self-expression and personal development. Through exploring and taking on new roles, improvisation, and emotional release, individuals can rebuild their identity in a fluid, flexible manner that adapts to life’s inevitable changes. Thus, identity becomes a dynamic process, constructed through spontaneity

⁸ Sarah Tomley, *What Would Freud Do? How the Greatest Psychotherapists Would Solve Your Everyday Problems* (Bucharest: Trei Publishing House, 2019), 171.

⁹ Moreno, *Fundamental Writings: On Psychodrama, Group Method, and Spontaneity*, 33.

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and creativity, reflecting each individual's unlimited potential for transformation, regardless of their profession.

The transformative journey at the intersection of drama and therapy is a dynamic process in which the individual rediscovers their identity through role-playing, catharsis, and spontaneity. This journey involves not only the healing of emotional wounds but also a profound exploration of how change and the present moment can become forces of personal creation and transformation. Through drama therapy, the individual learns to reinterpret their past, embrace the present, and view the future with a sense of limitless possibilities, regardless of their profession.

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