

INFLUENCE OF THE THEATER OF SPONTANEITY UPON THE MODERN DRAMA

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The central task of the Viennese Theater of Spontaneity between 1921 and 1923 was to bring about a revolution of the theater, completely to change the theatrical events. It attempted this change in fourfold manner:

1. The elimination of the playwright and of the written play.
2. Participation of the audience, to be a "theater without spectators." Everyone is a participant, everyone is an actor.
3. The actors and the audience are now the only creators. Everything is improvised, the play, the action, the motive, the words, the encounter and the resolution of the conflicts.
4. The old stage has disappeared, in its place steps the open stage, the spacestage, the open space, the space of life, life itself.

FROM SPONTANEITY THEATER TO PSYCHODRAMA

But how is a theater of pure spontaneity possible? Gradually it became clear to me, after hundreds of individuals were tested, that the talent for spontaneity is rare and undeveloped but that it is "trainable," that spontaneity of the individual is undependable for assignments with which he is not thoroughly familiar. The pressure of immediate daily production in face of ever-new groups provoked us to discover new methods in order to keep alive the interest of the public.

Here follow some of the reactions of the European press between 1923 and 1925:

Paul Stefan, *Die Stunde*, Vienna, May 5, 1924: Vienna has an ensemble under the direction of J. L. Moreno, which, instead of reproducing written lines, improvises them on the spot. I assure you that this can be more amusing and impressive than the work of all our classicists, including Strindberg.

Richard Smekal, *Neues Wiener Journal*, Vienna, June 16, 1924: Even the best of imaginations cannot foresee coming events. Only living experience enables us to realize the full significance of their playing. It is wrong to regard Impromptu merely as a substitute for the legitimate theatre. Viewed in the proper light, it is the most interesting and stimulating experiment of the day.

Joseph, *Welt Blatt*, Vienna, April 21, 1924: The poet stands in the

midst of his players and transfers his idea to them. The curtain rises immediately afterward, and they begin to play. The play, called Imagination, was simple, gripping and creative in its presentation.

Robert Muller, *Prager Presse*, Prague, March 13, 1925: As a contrast to, and after the problem theatre of our day, Moreno's Impromptu Theatre offers real recreation and completely new perspectives. . . . The spectators are thrown into a novel situation, as they are conscious of the accidental character of the developments on the stage. Like life itself, it has the thrill and excitement of the unexpected.

Dr. Hans Knudsen, *Berliner Börsen Zeitung*, March 15, 1925: Remember, it was no one less than Goethe who suggested Impromptu playing. In Book II, Chapter IX of *Die Lehrjahre*, he says Impromptu playing "should be introduced in every theatre. The ensemble should exercise regularly in this way, and the public would certainly profit if an unwritten play were performed once a month." What a change in the aims of the theatre!

Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten, Leipzig, December 21, 1924: It is not impossible, if we guide ourselves by what we know of the history of our spiritual evolution, that the Impromptu Theatre is the Theatre of the Future.

Rheinische Musik und Theater Zeitung, July 19, 1924: The Movement is not limited to Austrian theatrical circles. Its influence grows visibly throughout Germany, north and south.

Ariadne, Berlin, December, 1924: The brain itself is used as the repertoire. The theatre is a theatre of first nights only. We believe in it. It goes down to the bedrock of the real substance of theatre.

Giacomo Boni, *Il Sereno*, Rome, November 26, 1924: They use the theatre as a newspaper! The living newspaper!

Haagsche Courant, The Hague, February 27, 1925: And what an interesting spectacle it is—Impromptu. Imagine, dear reader, the public suggests plays to the actors, the audience itself can play.

The theater of "one hundred percent spontaneity" met with the greatest resistance from the public and the press. They were used to depend on "cultural conserves" of the drama and not to trust spontaneous creativity. Therefore, when the spontaneity theater offered good theater, honest, artistically workable spontaneity, the entire undertaking appeared suspicious to them. The spontaneity play seemed to them to be thoroughly rehearsed and prepared, in other words, a hoax. When, however, a play was bad and lifeless, they drew the hasty conclusion that real spontaneity is not possible. We lost the interest of the public and it became difficult to maintain the financial stability of the theater. I saw before me the task of changing the primary attitude of the public and the critics. That seemed to me to be impossible without a total revolution of our culture. My discouragement at continuing a

purely spontaneous theater reached its highest crisis when I recognized that my best spontaneity actors—Peter Lorre, Hans Rodenberg, Robert Müller and others—slowly turned away from the theater of spontaneity and joined the “normal” theater and the cinema.

Confronted with this dilemma, I attempted first “The Living Newspaper”; this is a synthesis between theater and newspaper, therefore genuinely different from the medieval and Russian custom of an oral and spoken newspaper. The “dramatized newspaper” is not a recitation, life itself is enacted. The events are dramatized. The newspaper method was a formal step forward but it lacked the deeper meaning of charysma.

Later I discovered a happier solution in the “therapeutic theater.” One hundred percent spontaneity was more easily achieved in a therapeutic theater. It was difficult to forgive esthetic and psychological imperfections in a normal actor. But it was easier to tolerate imperfections and irregularities of an abnormal person, a patient. Imperfections were, so to speak, to be expected and often quite welcome.

The actors were transformed into auxiliary egos and also they, within the therapeutic climate, were tolerated. The theater of spontaneity developed an intermediary form of the theater, the theater of catharsis, the psychodrama. “It is noteworthy that the psychodrama has nothing to do with ‘Happening,’ although it may, in its vulgarized form, be confused with it, as for instance, with a psychomusical spectacle which was arranged by art students in Anthony’s University Residence in 1959 and which later was considered a happening. In opposition to its anarchic amorphous theatricality, which in the happening is played up to a fashionable craze, the aim of psychodrama is a genuine organization of form, a creative self-realization in the act, on a structuring of space, a realization of human relationships within the scenic action. In the happening individuals behave in a self-idolizing, self-sufficient manner; as no form is brought about, also genuine participation of the group of invited spectators is not possible; everyone is relegated to himself, dependent only on his completely narcissistic behavior. Yes, one may say that unrelatedness is the salient feature of ‘Happenings,’ whereas the theme of psychodrama is precisely the relationship of the individual to the group and to society.”¹

¹ Paul Pörtner, “Psychodrama: Theater der Spontaneität,” *Theater Heute*, September, 1967, p. 13.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS OF THE SPONTANEITY THEATER IN THE USA

When I immigrated into the USA in the year 1925, I continued my experiments with audience participation, first in Carnegie Hall in 1929, then in the Civic Repertory Theater, 1930, where spontaneity exercises took place with Howard DaSilva, Burgess Meredith, John Garfield, among others; later the Guild Theater organized a performance of the Living Newspaper. I opened the Mansfield Theater with spontaneity productions of various kinds in 1948. Slowly my ideas began to influence the Group Theater and the followers of Stanislavski. Elia Kazan employed the psychodramatic method in the Actor’s Studio. There is a superficial relationship between psychodrama and Stanislavski’s method. However, whereas Stanislavski used improvisation partially in order to perfect the performance, I permitted, even encouraged imperfection in order to attain total spontaneity.²

Our first experiments with the Living Newspaper in America in the Guild Theater occasioned the following reactions in the press:

New York Evening World Telegram, March 28, 1931 (Douglas Gilbert): “To obviate the suspicion of previous rehearsals Dr. Moreno’s troupe will dramatize news events of the day.”

New York Sun, March 30, 1931: “The audience at the Guild Theatre on Sunday will see a ‘newsreel’ of current events created in stage form under their very noses, acted without any sort of rehearsal. It will be possible to read in *The Sun* on Saturday evening the account of a bank robbery, a public ceremony or the death of a prominent man and to see that selfsame incident portrayed on the stage only twenty-four hours later.”

New York Times, April 6, 1931: “The first endeavor was to be a newspaper drama and the master explained the situation and assigned the parts swiftly.”

New York Morning Telegraph, April 7, 1931 (Stanley Chapman): “The impromptu players will present a spontaneous dramatization of a newspaper. Presently all the members of the impromptu came on the stage and the doctor told them off for parts. He designated one as the owner of a newspaper, another as the city editor and another as the advertising manager.”

New York Evening Post, April 6, 1931 (John Mason Brown): “You are now in the main office of a newspaper. Yes, in the main office of *The Daily Robot*, waiting for news.”

² See *Psychodrama*, Vol I, p. 38-40 for amplification.

THE MODERN AMERICAN THEATER (THE LIVING THEATER, 1950-60, THE OPEN THEATER, 1963, GUERRILLA THEATER, THEATER OF THE STREETS, THEATER GAMES, LIQUID THEATER, ETC. 1963-1972)

In the last twenty years the American tendency to overcome the old, dogmatic theater has become visible. Theater producers attempt to incorporate the spectators in the action. It frees theater partially from written plays but it uses theater for social and political aims in the sense of Brecht and other playwrights. They hold conferences in which the actors are involved in a psychological change in order to deliver slowly a theatrical piece.

REVOLUTIONARY DEVELOPMENTS IN GERMAN THEATER

In the German theater, thanks to the initiative of Paul Pörtner,³ several transactions developed called "Mitspiele" or "Interplays" which "resemble psychodrama—or more exactly the sociodrama—and which, when performed in Ulm, Heidelberg, Nürnberg, caused discussions, arguments, fights within the public. The participants exchanged word for word with the actors. The actors, from the moment free improvisation began, joined forces more strongly into an ensemble, that is, they formed a group together. If any moral could be extracted from this, then it would be that of the interdependence of the group players within the improvisational frame: the actors were once more forced to listen to one another, while digesting arguments being played out or brought forth verbally. To interplay means playing with the other and with the public; not only do the players interplay with each other, but the public also interplays with the actors. A few single persons play within the spectator group, a few others within the actor's group, but the two groups also interplay, interact with each other."

*THE FUTURE OF THE MODERN THEATER
AND SYNTHETIC PSYCHODRAMA*

Modern revolutionary theater, in Europe as well as in America, has actually developed in the direction of the spontaneity theater but it is still not capable of bridging over the old, dogmatic barrier. "The Living Theater" and "The Open Theater" in America are still tied to the *drama conserve*. True, they have no playwright in the old sense, but the ensemble of players

³ *Op. cit.* Paul Pörtner is a playwright—organizer of "Interplays," (Scherenschnitt) and editor of a series of books documenting modern theater.

improvises step-by-step the parts of a play which they then melt together into an organized play. The aim of the ensemble is still to create a "theater piece" which they then repeat over and over with minor variations. The old form of the theater is therefore still there, with a few interesting deviations which they have taken over from the spontaneity theater, the elimination of the playwright, participation of the audience, therapeutic motivations, greater freedom of the actors, the freedom of his body, up to the total freeing from costumes, complete nudity, all functions of life being performed in front of the public without any restraints. But everything that is performed is carefully "rehearsed," tried out, from the dialogue to sexual intercourse.

The "Interplays" in the German theater (Pörtner) are very promising because of genuine spontaneity in the contact with the public but the honest art of the moment, in the here-and-now is still a utopia.

In contrast, modern psychodrama is always new and fresh, unrepeated in every session. We have shown that there are new ways and new goals. The great problem which is yet to be solved is to bring the *quality* of the creation and the *stability* of the performances to a higher level. We have definitely noted that in hundreds of places with every possible group of persons a meaningful psychodrama can be created. But however worthwhile the therapeutic effects may be, the *level* of production is frequently very low. How can we bring the level to a higher development? The question of quality hangs together with this. The quality depends to the largest degree upon the choice of director and auxiliary egos. They are not always of the same quality and seldom reach the highest level of esthetics and therapeusis. The question remains: "How can we overcome these difficulties?" The answer: through analysis of the production and by practice.

An overview of thousand of psychodramatic directors has yielded the following result: from among the many practicing directors at best one percent has the quality, the spontaneity, the charisma, the persistent energy to inspire a production which reaches the same level as Shakespeare or Ibsen. Naturally, one can not compare psychodrama with the old form of theater, they are totally different processes in themselves. The task of the psychodramatic academy is, therefore, to discover directors of the highest culture and to train them. Not all the directors whom we have trained are of the same quality. We must therefore eliminate many persons in the course of selection for directorial training.

Just as there is a rank order among the directors, so there is a rank order among protagonists and also among auxiliary egos. There are protagonists who

have an unheard of capacity for self-presentation, but then there are also protagonists of lesser talent. The same goes for auxiliary egos in their ability to take the roles of others.

The developments are still in their infancy. However, out of the thousands of theater institutes and the growing number of psychodrama centers in all countries slowly new talents and methods will come into being. These will create the theater of the future.

Theater and therapy are closely interwoven. But also here there are many steps. There will be a theater which is purely therapeutic, there will be a theater which is free from therapeutic objective and then there will be also many intermediary forms.

THE APPLICATION OF SOCIODYNAMICS AND ENCOUNTER GROUPS IN AN URBAN COLLEGE

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For several years I had been teaching college students to apply their knowledge of sociology, psychology, group dynamics and related areas in the solution of individual and group problems, particularly in the field of education. It is amazing how little transfer of learning there is from the traditional college classroom to real-life situations. Most beginning teachers, for instance, have studied a great deal of educational psychology. In addition they have had innumerable discussions, with their peers and instructors, on theoretical and practical aspects of human behavior, especially as it is found in the typical classroom. Yet, most teachers begin to teach as if the learning took place in a vacuum. They deal with problems through imitation; the "experienced" teacher in the room next door is used as their guide to dealing with children, rather than their own knowledge and insight. The same seems to be true of young group leaders, beginning social workers and, even, young revolutionaries.

One evening, after a long and stimulating seminar with Dr. Moreno I decided to pull together my thoughts on the matter, to organize my ideas more carefully, and, as I think he would do, to coin a term that described the type of course that I felt young people really needed. The not very original, but useful, term "Sociodynamics" was the result. By coincidence the Chairman of the then new Department of Urban and Ethnic Studies at City College came to visit me at Beacon to suggest my teaching a course which would be of special value to students from diverse urban backgrounds, who were primarily interested in becoming "social change agents." Thus, in the Fall of 1969, I began teaching Sociodynamics not as an incidental part of a course in educational psychology or human relations, but as a distinct subject in its own right. What emerged was an eclectic, interdisciplinary polyglot that addressed itself to "tying together" many pieces of knowledge that students had accumulated but had never been taught how to use!

From the beginning the course has been problem-centered. The students and the professor consider any problem encountered in the urban setting in

* Dr. Rivera was a good friend of the editors. Saddened as we are at his death, it gives us much satisfaction to publish this paper, presented at the 29th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, in New York City, April 3, 1971, at this time.