

A brief history of psychodrama

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The method of Psychodrama was created by Romanian-born Psychiatrist Dr. Jacob Levy Moreno (1889-1974) and further developed in collaboration with his wife, Zerka Moreno (now in her 90's and living in Virginia, USA). Psychodrama was the first recognised method of group psychotherapy and is practised in more than 100 countries. It has contributed ideas and techniques used in many other forms of psychotherapy.

Moreno also developed related methods and concepts such as sociodrama, the theatre of spontaneity, role play, group psychotherapy, sociometry and the principle of the 'encounter.' Many later developments in interactive, improvisational theatre, applied drama and forms of therapy such as Gestalt and self-help groups have their origins in the ideas and work of Moreno.

Psychodrama developed from Moreno's interest in philosophy, mysticism and theatre, and his observations of group interactions and relationships. Moreno was among the first to recognise the healing power of a group, including the importance of self-help groups, where each person becomes the healing agent of the other, without any special training or knowledge other than his or her own experience. Moreno later coined the phrase "group psychotherapy" to recognise this particular form of treatment.

Moreno left Europe for the United States in 1925. With emigration, he brought his interest in working with children, spontaneous theatre and psychotherapy treatment with the use of theatre principles. He also was very interested in the study of relationships in groups, dating back to his work at a First World War refugee camp in Mitterndorf, Austria. He continued to refine his sociometric studies at the Hudson State Training School for Girls, Hudson, N.Y.

In the late 1930s, Moreno established Beacon Hospital in Beacon, NY. It was an alternative hospital with a therapeutic theatre. Shortly after, he met Zerka Toeman, whom he married in 1949. In 1942, he founded the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, the first group therapy organisation, which continues today.

J.L. Moreno died in 1974, and group psychotherapy, psychodrama and sociometry have continued to grow and expand as he predicted. Those interested in J.L. Moreno's life may seek out his psychodrama volumes and numerous other works. Two excellent biographies include "Jacob Levy Moreno, 1889-1974" by Rene Marineau and "J.L. Moreno" by Paul Hare and June Hare.

After his death, Zerka continued to travel throughout the world to teach and demonstrate psychodrama. She has been especially noted for bringing psychodrama to interested clinicians and educators in Asia, including China, Taiwan and Japan. Zerka continues to write and conduct training sessions from her home in Virginia. Zerka's collected writings, entitled 'The Quintessential Zerka,' have recently been edited by Horvatin et al. and published by Routledge.

Psychodrama was established in the UK primarily via two routes. In the 1970's, former students of Moreno, Dean and Doreen Elefthery, travelled periodically from the USA to Europe and trained a number of practitioners, including Jenny Biancardi of the UK's Northern School of Psychodrama. Around this time, Marcia Karp travelled from the USA and in 1974 created, with her partner Ken Sprague, The Holwell Psychodrama Centre in North Devon. This Centre thrived for more than 25 years, and was where Marcia and Ken trained many of the first generation of UK psychodramatists and trainers. Marcia continues to practise in London, and there are currently four centres for psychodrama training in the UK: Birmingham, Oxford, London and the Northern School (with training rotating between Manchester, Newcastle and Glasgow).

(We thank and acknowledge the writings of USA-based Psychodramatist Karen Carnabucci in this historical overview. Some of this material is drawn from her work.)