

## Writing about an “Impromptu Man”

Jonathan D. Moreno

The idea that I would someday write my father’s intellectual biography (to be published in fall 2014 as *Impromptu Man: J. L. Moreno and the Origins of Psychodrama, Encounter Culture, and the Social Network*), is one that has its roots in my teen years. It wasn’t a conscious decision at that time, but I always felt somehow more an observer of the cultural phenomena associated with J.L. than an active participant, even when I was growing up in the midst of it all in Beacon. I now realize that in effect I was taking mental notes to be filed for some later purpose. Then, too, I have been interested in the history of ideas for as long as I can remember, even before my college years, though again I wouldn’t have recognized it in such formal terms. From my point of view it all worked out quite well: What could be more appropriate for an author aiming to write the development of J.L.’s thought and its influence than to be a trained philosopher and professor in departments of history of science and medical ethics? The serendipity amazes even me.

I’ve been asked what I learned about J.L. during this two-year project that surprised me. Of course I only knew him as an old man (I was 7 when he was 70), so his most energetic and formative period was well behind him when I came along. In that sense there was much to discover. Importantly, I approached this project not as a memoirist but as an historian, therefore my objective was to connect certain previously disconnected dots in J.L.’s life and in the development of his ideas and the impact of those ideas. Rene Marineau’s 1987 biography was of course a starting point, especially concerning the Vienna years, and I drew on it for that period. But since Rene’s book a great deal of new literature has appeared, not only about J.L. specifically but also about the cultural trends he influenced. For instance, a wonderful biography of the actor Peter Lorre appeared in 2006 that confirms and enriches information about J.L.’s relationship with Lorre and the other actors in J.L.’s circle in Vienna. (J.L. stayed in contact with Lorre after he came to Hollywood from Germany.) Also, Robert Waldl has done a persuasive, textual and archival reconstruction of J.L.’s influence on Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, perhaps the most influential book in the history of humanistic psychology. There is also some recent schol-

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arship about the human potential movement that flourished in the 1960s, and a number of the important participants in that movement are now of an age where they are interested in taking stock of the golden age of applied humanistic psychology. These written and interview sources were very helpful to me.

The roughly 15-year period between J.L.'s immigration in 1925–26 (the ship left England in December 1925 and arrived in New York in January 1926), and his meeting my mother in 1941, proved to be very difficult to reconstruct. Much of what is said about that time has been repeated among J.L.'s followers without confirmation by independent sources. The truth is that he was a terrible historian, often getting dates wrong and using his fertile imagination to alter events. It seems that before Zerka stepped in to organize his files he saved virtually nothing in the way of letters and other documents. Thus there are few written records from 1925 to 1940 apart from a clutch of letters in the mid-1920s that his brother William saved, letters that came into Ed Schreiber's hands and to whom I am most grateful that he has agreed they should be part of the J.L. collection at Harvard. There were also newspaper articles in major media like the *New York Times* and the Associated Press, and it surprises me that no one had taken a close look at these before. Serigio Guimaraes's own digging around the newspaper archives and J.L.'s papers proved very helpful. These previously forgotten tell a very interesting story about his interactions with the press. I was aware of his relentlessness in the pursuit of his ideas but not so much his clever use of the popular press to promote them (and to make himself a bit of a celebrity), especially during the 1930s and 1940s. He clearly enjoyed cultivating those connections and one journalist in particular at the Associated Press took J.L. as a personal favorite, writing or arranging to have written a number of widely read articles about psychodrama and sociometry. Though it is well known that J.L. assessed championships boxers and predicted the outcomes of heavyweight fights when that was perhaps the most popular sport in the country, along with baseball, the unique role he played in the sports pages of just about every major newspaper has not been fully appreciated in its historical context.

In spite of the meager documentation I was able to draw some conclusions and develop some impressions about J.L. during the inter-war years. Among the factors that impressed me most were the obstacles that J.L. faced as an immigrant in 1926, including resorting to bribery to extend his visa (undoubtedly a common practice in those days). Though he was not a young man his optimism and self-confidence about his ability to conquer the new world seems not to have flagged, unlike so many other new arrivals from central Europe who never found their way in America. For example, the novelist and essayist Stefan Zweig was another Viennese Jewish intellectual, born eight years before J.L., but unlike J.L. he felt utterly lost after the collapse of the old Viennese culture and the self-immolation of Europe in two wars in his lifetime. After an unhappy sojourn in New York Zweig committed suicide in Brazil in 1942. By contrast, J.L. did not come from the great wealth of Jews like Zweig (or other important thinkers of that generation like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ernst Cassirer), and did not identify himself with European civilization so closely. J.L. was determined to see himself as a universal being who was, as he said, a special case with God, therefore he was more prepared to embrace the New World and American values, which he did with the energy of a convert to Americanism and to the New Deal of U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt. Also, he left Europe long before the Nazis took power, so he did not feel that he was on the run like so many 1930s refugees

(including Kurt Lewin and Fritz Perls), but could tell himself that he was master of his fate.

An important relationship in that period that we may never understand as well as would be hoped was that with Beatrice Beecher, J.L.'s first wife who it seems married him to help him obtain citizenship. Beecher was the granddaughter of the great American minister Henry Ward Beecher, who led the movement to abolish slavery, and her aunt was Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* turned many Americans against slavery. Therefore within a couple of years of arriving in the country J.L. was linked by marriage to a prominent American family. (At that time Beecher was second only to his brother William in importance to keeping J.L.'s boundless enthusiasm moored to reality, and without William's canny appreciation of business J.L. could never have succeeded in his various endeavors.) Beecher was not only a far more critical link to vital early supporters of J.L.'s work than has been realized, but she also seems not to have had an early death as he asserted in his memoir. My research assistant and I independently examined published death records and we concluded that, contrary to J.L.'s assertion, Beecher died in 1972 and is buried in a Brooklyn cemetery. If that is the case then the obvious question is why they seem to have had no contact for nearly 40 years, in spite of their close working relationship during their pro forma marriage.

Most of the book is about J.L.'s professional life. I argue that a crucial turning point in his career was 1930–1932, when he reluctantly concluded that he could not make a truly impromptu popular theater succeed and turned instead to psychiatry and social science. The contrast is vividly drawn by noting a biting *New York Times* review of his first public Impromptu Theater performance at Carnegie Hall in 1930, and comparing that experience to his successful appearances at the American Psychiatric Association in 1931 and 1932, where he defended Lincoln from the psychoanalysts and his group methods (really they were sociometric studies) were welcomed by influential asylum and prison officials. J.L. himself said that he found his actors both in Vienna and New York drifting away from impromptu as they were offered opportunities to work in traditional theater, but I think if he had found a way to make a living and stay involved in theater he would have been most happy to do so. Actors and mental patients competed for his affection, and if they were one and the same so much the better; but up to the mid-1930s actors were his first love. Nonetheless, he could hardly ignore the new supporters he found among major institutions while the actors he enjoyed were so unreliable.

If there is an aspect of the book that is a memoir, it has to do with my experience of J.L.'s frustration in the 1960s. Because he burst forth so early his ideas were being integrated into the culture during a time when he was aging and his sure feel for the media was fraying a bit. His old world style was less charming after the 1950s and the new generation of quantitatively oriented social scientists was taken aback by his insistence on talking about God and his broad generalizations about the cosmos. J.L.'s psychodrama presentations at professional meetings still got attention but the new positivists saw them as entertainment or curiosities rather than as science. Nonetheless, he felt great sympathy for the hippies. Had he been physically able there is no doubt he would have gone to San Francisco in the late 1960s to conduct psychodramas in Golden Gate Park.

In fact, my story ends in northern California. As I was writing *Impromptu Man* I became more and more interested in J.L.'s attitudes toward technology. I believe J.L. was

much more ambivalent about technology than a simple reading of his writings on cultural conserves suggests. He was always looking for new ways to use communications media, including film and television. Already in 1934, while he was awaiting the publication of *Who Shall Survive?* and contemplating the purchase of land in Beacon, New York for his sanitarium, he had founded Therapeutic Motion Pictures. He was intrigued by the possibilities of television, and even Arthur C. Clarke foresaw televised psychodrama in his novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* that finally became the Stanley Kubrick film. The Internet would have fascinated J.L. and he would feel kinship with today's social media technologists. As I explain in the book, many of the new young leaders of social media have rediscovered J.L. and see him as a visionary, confirming his conviction that the best time for an impromptu man was yet to come.



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