

THE LIVES THEY LIVED

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ZERKA MORENO

She had little doubt that acting out experiences and feelings could save people — and help with child-raising.

BY BENOIT DENIZET-LEWIS DEC. 21, 2016



Zerka Moreno with her son, Jonathan, in Beacon, N.Y., in July 1955. From Regina Moreno

When Zerka Moreno gave birth to her son, Jonathan, in 1952, she saw his arrival as a “golden opportunity.” How much more fun and creative might his life be, she wondered, if he were raised using therapeutic techniques like role-playing or talking to an empty chair? Each was pioneered by J.L. Moreno, Zerka’s husband and the founder of psychodrama, a form of therapy in which people act out their experiences and feelings in an effort to gain insight or achieve catharsis.

J.L. called his method “Shakespearean psychiatry,” and he and Zerka had little doubt that it would save the world — if only the world would play along. Not only did psychodrama help people suffering from grave psychological problems, the couple believed, but it had the added benefit of building understanding and empathy, whether for a nagging spouse or a beggar on the street. “Put yourself into the place of a victim of injustice and share his hurt,” J.L. once suggested as the first rule of psychodrama. “Reverse roles with him.” Warring countries might also benefit from psychodrama, if only J.L. could get their leaders in the same room. During the Vietnam War, he unsuccessfully lobbied Bill Moyers, the White House press secretary, to let him direct Lyndon Johnson and Ho Chi Minh in a psychodrama of potential healing.

Though Zerka had never heard of psychodrama before emigrating from Europe in 1939 and meeting J.L. two years later, she threw herself into his life’s work. She helped him establish the Psychodramatic Institute in Beacon, N.Y., home to a motley crew suffering from everything from addiction to schizophrenia. Unlike most psychiatric hospitals, this one featured a large stage on which patients were expected to act out their issues. When leading a session, Zerka had little patience for excessive navel-gazing. “Too much talking; let’s get into action!” she would yell, certain that physically acting out a problem worked better than endlessly talking about it.

There was little daylight between the couple’s professional and personal lives — they lived some 50 yards from their sanitarium — and they saw no compelling reason not to create what they considered “the first psychodramatic family.” (They wrote a book by that name.) In her memoirs, “To Dream Again,” Zerka insisted that her “goal was not to turn our child into a guinea pig or an experiment.” Instead, she hoped to make Jonathan’s life — and that of his much older stepsister, Regina, from J.L.’s previous marriage — “more colorful and interesting.” Zerka could imagine few fates worse than a humdrum existence.

Trying to see the world through her son’s eyes, Zerka would lie on her back next to 5-month-old Jonathan, gurgling along with him. His sounds, she wrote, “induced in me the most fantastic cosmic tales such as it has never been my pleasure to create sense. We exchanged opinions about how strange it was here, how peculiar these humans.” When Jonathan was 2, Zerka taught him the concept of role reversal. If he fought with a friend over a toy, Zerka had Jonathan play the part of his friend. The tiff usually ended promptly, and play resumed. “After all,” Zerka wrote, “each child was giving in to himself.”

‘If the unexamined life is not worth living, the un-lived life is not worth examining.’

Psychodramatic techniques also defused typical parent-child squabbles. One night at dinner, Jonathan, then 3, said he wasn’t hungry and refused to eat a meal Zerka had spent the afternoon cooking. They bickered until J.L. had heard enough. “This is ridiculous,” he said. “Zerka, get up, become Jonathan and take his seat, and Jonathan, you be Mommy and sit in her chair.” Playing his mother, Jonathan stretched his spine to make himself taller and looked down at Zerka, who had shrunk her body and lifted her feet off the floor to play the little boy. “Eat!” Jonathan commanded, doing his best overbearing-mother impression. Zerka, who had been grazing on food as she cooked and could relate to her son’s lack of appetite, said she wasn’t hungry. “So don’t eat,” Jonathan said with a smile.

When they were older, Jonathan and Regina would wander over to the ostensibly off-limits sanitarium and hang out with patients. “My best friends were drug addicts and narcissists,” Jonathan, now a 64-year-old professor at the University of Pennsylvania and one of the

country's leading bioethicists, recalls. "I could have very easily been totally nuts, but people are amazed at how normal I am." Though he rarely practices psychodrama with his own family ("I'm not inclined to be very dramatic, except in the classroom"), he suspects his upbringing taught him keen observation skills. "I'm also told my interpersonal skills are good, but it's hard to know if that's nature or nurture."

Regina, who is now 77 and teaches psychodrama in the Bay Area and in China, has little doubt that her unconventional childhood "made me more empathetic, more open-minded." It also helped her work through teenage anxiety. "When I had a relationship problem, my dad had me talk to an empty chair," she says. "I'd play myself and then switch and play the person I was in conflict with. It helped me work out my feelings."

Zerka never stopped practicing or promoting psychodrama, even after the amputation of her right arm from cancer in 1958 and J.L.'s death in 1974. She wrote extensively and wasn't one to mince words, especially when it came to Sigmund Freud. Zerka mocked his penis-envy theory, what she called his "military model of the family" and psychoanalysis itself, which she believed was insufficient to achieve catharsis. In her memoirs, she wrote of the time J.L. confronted Freud after a lecture. "You analyze people's dreams," J.L. told a surprised Freud. "In a way, you disillusion them." By contrast, J.L. said, "I teach them to dream again."

Until her death, Zerka trained therapists from her room in a retirement community and then a nursing home, where she liked to tell jokes. But she could get serious in an instant. When Zerka's nephew Daniel came to visit a decade ago, he told her about a painful conflict with a family member, to which Zerka wasted little time pointing toward an empty chair by the window. They could work with that.

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