An Interview with Zerka Moreno, TEP
by Victor Yalom

Zerka discusses the essentials of psychodrama theory and technique, as well as her life and work with her late husband Jacob Moreno.

"Don't tell me. Show me!"

Victor Yalom: You look wonderful. You're really 83?

Zerka Moreno: Next month. 13th of June. I remember when I was 8, thinking, "I'll be 13 on the 13th of June. Won't I be old?"

Victor Yalom: I'm so happy that you agreed to be here with us and to share with our readers your life and your work in Psychodrama which was originally founded by your late husband, J.L. Moreno. It's hard to believe you're 83; you're so full of life. You have a lot left in you.

Zerka Moreno: Thank you. I'm happy to be here, too. I always like to talk about my work.

Victor Yalom: And your life.

Zerka Moreno: And my life. The two are interwoven.

VY: I think the best place to start would be to tell me a little bit about what psychodrama is.

Zerka Moreno: The easiest way to think about it is "the mind in action." Instead of talking about your concerns, we come from Missouri and say, "Don't tell me. Show me!" Showing means to act it out. Show me an action-in that way you show me what your concern is. That's the shortest way to describe it.

VY: And the reason?

Zerka Moreno: Life produces its own constraints. Many of us can't deal with these
We claim that the most central thing about the human being, is spontaneity and creativity. There's no culture that lays stress upon spontaneity and creativity of the individual. Children have a lot of it, and they get squelched somewhere along the way, distorted, pushed under, rejected. We greatly believe in teaching children to have good motor control, memory, and we measure their intelligence. But what about their spontaneity? There are people who are very highly intelligent and yet have very little spontaneity and creativity. It's a twin principle: the child represents for us spontaneity. Saying "yes!" to life. Wanting to live life. If you watch a small child, they're full of life. We stop them from making noises, from stamping, from laughing, even though this is the way they live. But we don't understand it very well. We want them to conform and to behave and to be like all the other nice people in the world. And so what happens to many of us is that we have to work very hard as we get older, to recapture that beginning of our selves.

VY: And psychodrama can help with that?

ZM: Yes, it helps you to express yourself in a new way. In a way that life doesn't usually permit. In a way, we live in two worlds, you know. We live in the world of reality, of objective reality. You and I can agree we're here, right? But you have another world, and I have another world that's invisible. Psychodrama makes that other world visible.

VY: And for what end?

ZM: To make you a more complete person. To make you more productive, to make you more integrated. We believe in the integrated personality.

VY: What are some ways that you go about doing that? How is psychodrama used? What is the structure of psychodrama?

ZM: Well, I first want to say that it's not only used as a form of psychotherapy. That's just one application. A very useful way of using psychodrama, as you probably know, is in role-playing. It's used in education, in administration, in many, many fields today. It
comes from psychodrama originally. But the source is your mind, whatever roles you play in your life; that's where we start.

VY: How do you go about doing it?

**Psychodrama Explained**

ZM: Ok. Let's say someone comes and says, "I'm having a terrible problem. My husband drinks, he beats me, he gambles, he's irresponsible, and he doesn't want to change." Bad situation all around. "What do I do? I can't divorce him, I'm Catholic. I'll be thrown out of the church, and will be isolated altogether. What do I do?" Well, that's very big, very serious problem. "Show me what your husband is like, since we don't have him here. Would he come?" "No, probably not. He doesn't believe in any of this stuff." So I have to assess: what can I contribute to the welfare of this woman? Is there something in this relationship that's still viable, or not? But I may have to help her, unfortunately, to see that it's not a viable relationship, if she wants to stay sane.

VY: Stay sane, or stay alive?

ZM: Absolutely. So, I would begin by saying, "I don't have your husband here; all I have is your perception of your husband." By the way, that perception may be distorted, but that's the only one we have. That's the one she lives with. So then I ask her to reverse roles and become her husband. I usually make them sit in a different seat, so that the body is moved as well. That's important. Because we're not just working up here in the head. We're working with the whole body; we're actors. We say that the human being is an improvising actor on the stage of life. Unlike in the theater, you don't have a script; I don't have a script. We have to interact on the spur of the moment, here and now. With whatever we have between us.

VY: And your late husband, the founder of Psychodrama, Jerome Moreno, coined the term, "here and now?"

ZM: Right. He coined the term and later many others used it, Perls and his Gestalt theory, Irv Yalom and the Existentialists.

VY: Yes, the phrase continues to express the immediate moment of human interactive experience.

ZM: So then I interview her as if she is her husband. And, by the way, she's learning a lot about her husband that she didn't know before. She comes very much closer to the reality of this man.
VY: How so?

ZM: The philosopher Wittgenstein said something like "To learn about the self, step outside the self." So what she's doing is, in the role of her husband, she's perceiving herself. I ask her what's wrong between them. "What do you think is going wrong between you. I've heard what your wife says. Now I'd like to hear what you think." Now you begin to find out the way they interact with one another.

VY: So she takes on the role of her own husband talking back to herself?

ZM: Eventually, she might. If there's someone else available to be an actor, then we bring in that person. If not, I keep role reversing her back and forth. She plays both roles. Sometimes, as this goes on, I may take the role of the patient and she may take on the role of the husband.

VY: Does that help her then to empathize more with the husband?

ZM: Let me explain what we're dealing with. We're dealing with two people, but three entities. Husband, wife, and the relationship between. We postulate that you cannot influence a psyche directly, except through a significant relationship. And so what we're dealing with, is that we're not only exploring the relationship, but trying to heal it. Can this be healed or not? That's the crucial decision to be made. It's also very possible that in the role of the husband, she suddenly learns—although he's told her about his miserable childhood, and how he was abused—, she suddenly begins to see and feel him in a different way. His humanity comes through. And because she sees and perceives in a different way, when she goes back in her own role, she has to change how she relates to him. What we're talking about here is behavior change. Not only cognitive insight. We don't really think that intellectual insight cures so well.

VY: Not cognitive insight by itself.

ZM: Not by itself. It needs to be coupled with an emotional part. Psychodrama deals with both. People use it often for insight-giving. I think that's only half the job. I'm not so concerned about what's going on up here [points to her head]. Because what's going up here is...

VY: If you experience in your body, or emotionally, then it's much more powerful.

ZM: For instance, when she sits over here, I'll say, "How do you sit?
Show me with your body how you sit." And he may sit half-turned away from her, rejecting her in a way. Or he may be sitting very close to her because he wants to re-establish contact with her. So you get all kinds of information, simply by making a role reversal. Now, later on, it may be possible that I do actually get to see him. You know, Moreno, way back in 1957 wrote an article called, "Psychodrama and the Psychopathology of Interpersonal Relationships," in which he used himself as a mediator between husband and wife. He didn't treat them together to begin with. They each had a complaint about the marriage. He saw the wife alone, and the husband alone. That was an entirely new way of proceeding. Freud never did that. He analyzed husband and wife, but never in reference to each other, but only in relation to their own life.

VY: Dr. Moreno wouldn't see them together?

ZM: Not yet. He would interpret the wife to the husband, and the husband to the wife.

VY: With their permission, of course.

ZM: Of course. They were both working at the relationship. Sometimes he was able to create a new bridge between these people. Sometimes it became clear that what they really needed, for both of them to stay sane, was to separate. And then he might produce what we called a "divorce catharsis," and that was a new idea. That you can produce a therapeutic divorce, without mangling the people involved. To bring them to the point of recognition that there's no return.

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VY: Back then, divorce was much less accepted. Was he successful in doing that?
ZM: Yes, a number of times. Also a number of times he was able to resuscitate the relationship.

VY: Did he do anything resembling traditional psychotherapy?

ZM: He began to discard traditional practice. Eventually, he developed psychodrama and put it into an interaction with each person.

VY: But was he trained in traditional psychoanalysis?

ZM: No, he was never trained in it. He was anti-analytic. He did not believe in Freud's model. Freud came from biology. Moreno was inspired by the great religions of this world. Freud was atheistic. Moreno was not. He said that the great religions of this world, and the prophets of this world, inspired him. It's an entirely different approach. Also, he did not believe, for a good scientific reason. He said that from the view of the individual, and the point of view of the human race, speech is a fairly late development. You learn to sit up, you learn to crawl, you learn to walk—all this before you speak. That means that for approximately two to three years, you have lived very intensively pre-verbally.

VY: In the body.

The Double Life and Surplus Reality

ZM: With the body, in the body, and in interaction with other people. We're in interaction with other people from the moment of birth on. Obviously that influences us. But let's face it: words can lie. Look at TV. Look at the politicians. They are lying through their teeth. And we're supposed to believe that? So, there's a more primordial level, beneath the level of speech, and that's the level of the act and the interact. And that's why he picked drama. But not the legitimate drama, but a new form of drama: improvisational drama. Which is the way we live in life. I don't know if you saw in my book, the patient that says to me, "I know what psychodrama is: it's the double of life." That's a very interesting, profound statement.

VY: How so?

ZM: The double life! In other words, you can have one life, and have another life in psychodrama.
another life in psychodrama.


ZM: What is surplus reality?

VY: You took the question right out of my mouth!

ZM: Yes, I saw where you were going. What this woman was doing, was she was entering her husband's reality. She's in surplus reality. Role reversal is a surplus reality technique—it's the reality beyond everyday reality, which is not visible, but very real. See, it's the not-visible-but-very-real that we're dealing with a great deal. That could be mythical. It could be almost anything. It can be a fairy tale. It can be your life as you want it to be. The old movie, The Secret Life of Walter Mitty had a psychodramatic idea, right? So, what are we reaching for? What is it that's crucial in catharsis? Well, we believe it is those scenes, those interactions, those realities, that life does not permit us, but which we need in order to be fulfilled. I call it the "If onlys!" Think of all the "if onlys" in your life. If you could lift those all out— you know how much time and energy you spend on these?

VY: A lot of energy, that's for sure.

ZM: A tremendous amount. Which deviates you from what you should be doing in actuality, here and now. In your mind you're somewhere else, with the "if onlys." The phone calls you didn't make, the phone calls you did make where you're thinking, "If only I hadn't made that phone call." The letters you should have answered. The email you should have sent.

VY: It's amazing we can attend to anything!

ZM: (laughing) Yes, well. You can really almost translate every aspect of life into a psychodrama, and use this to explore how you would have liked to change your childhood or your adolescence or your professional life. It's an attempt to find yourself in a new realm, in a new way. To be spontaneous and to be creative in a way that you weren't before. That's a way of healing the self, too. It may not always work. I often think that in psychodrama we're dealing with the fringes of life. This is a new idea that I'm just getting now, really.
VY: Isn't it amazing how we

ZM: Over 60 years.

VY: And you're having a new idea about it right now.

ZM: Yes, it's an interesting thing: new ideas keep coming up. Creativity is like that. It's the twin principle: spontaneity is defined as a new response to an old situation, or an adequate response to a new situation. Creativity, which is its twin idea, is creating something that wasn't there before.] Think of this guy Bill Gates. He's created a whole new world! It wasn't there before. [quote:The whole idea that "things don't change" in this world is nonsense! Things are constantly being created.

Who could have dreamt about the internet 20 years ago?

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VY: Very few apparently.

ZM: So that's a particular form of creativity. I mean, of course, he's a good businessman, too. He likes to make money. I don't know that
his ways of making money are so benign, but that's not the issue. The issue is here is something creative-someone creating something entirely new, and we had no idea how important it was going to be for the world.

VY: So, speaking of creating lives?

ZM: We need to recreate our life?

**Meeting and Loving Dr. Moreno**

VY: I’d like to hear a little more about your life. And how you met Jacob Moreno.

ZM: I brought my psychotic older sister to him to be treated. I had brought her from Europe.

VY: You brought her all the way from Europe to be treated? How did that come about?

ZM: I first came here by myself, from England, just after the Second World War was declared. I was 22 years old. I knew nothing about Moreno or psychodrama. I had studied art and psychology. My sister became psychotic when I was 19. I was going to be an artist, a fashion designer, especially for the stage, costumes and scenery. You know, London is a wonderful place for theater. Then my sister became desperately ill, psychotic. And somehow I knew; I understood what had gone wrong. And I thought, "Oh, I must look into this," and began to study psychology. But none of the classic psychology taught me what my sister was like. And the fact that I grasped her so well, understood it, without speech, I thought that there is something here. There was no combination possible. When I met Moreno, the combination was possible.

VY: And how did you meet Moreno?

ZM: The war broke out. My sister was living 25 kilometers from the German border in Belgium. Very dangerous.

VY: Not a good place to be.

ZM: Terrible. But I came to this country. I said to my mother and father, "Let me go. I may be able to save my sister." My only sister, five years older. The war progressed also on the continent and I finally
managed to collect the money to bring her over in 1941. And she was again psychotic. And she needed hospitalization, because she was not without suicidal ideation. This time she had a small child to take care of. So my brother-in-law found a home for the little boy, and I found a hospital for my sister.

VY: Where was this?

ZM: In Beacon, New York. It's about 60 miles north of New York City on the Hudson River.

VY: This is where you live now?

ZM: Yes, where I live now. I tell my students, "My life is a fairy tale. I came here as a helpless little refugee, unhappy because of my sister's illness. I came here to find a new life for my sister. I found a new life for me. You know what the lesson was? In this lifetime Zerka, don't look for anything for yourself. Look to help other people, and you shall find happiness. It was a profound lesson. It really became the basis of my life; that's where my happiness comes from.

In this lifetime
Zerka, don't look for anything for yourself. Look to help other people, and you shall find happiness. It was a profound lesson.

VY: Your happiness comes from??

ZM: I'm very content with my life. The older I get, the more content I get. We live in a nutty world, let's face it. Absolutely crazy! In my young days, I would be infuriated with this and that. Now, no matter how crazy the world is, I feel fine. I'm doing what I can, what I'm best at. How can anybody be happier than that? Anyway, Moreno discovered my talent.

Belgium to New York City

VY: Your talent for??
And, since confession is good for the soul, I did all the wrong things. I did all the things a nice, middle-class Jewish girl doesn't do. All the "thou shalt nots." Getting involved with a man who's the father of a child, who's married. It was a very complicated situation. And he wasn't willing to let me go. I tried to break it off, and he said he couldn't. That he would follow me wherever I would go.
Moreno gets up from behind his desk, spreads his arms and says, "Yeeessss." And I think, "That is the strangest greeting I have ever heard."

You're getting into my history, and not into psychodrama, although it's all connected together—is that what you want?

VY: You're doing fine.

ZM: Ok. I walk in there; I look at him and I think, "Wait a minute. He looks familiar. I know this man." And my inner voice is saying, "You're as crazy as your sister. You've never been in Beacon before." Moreno gets up from behind his desk, spreads his arms and says, "Yeeessss." And I think, "That is the strangest greeting I have ever heard."

VY: I heard he wore a cape.

ZM: You know what? Later on, he told me that he had thought, "This is she." He was looking for a muse. And I became his muse.

VY: What do you mean?

ZM: A muse, an inspiring goddess. You know, the muses? The muse of music and dance. All his life he was looking for a muse. A muse who would be an inspiration to him. The extraordinary thing was, I was 24 years old, I didn't think I was particularly well-educated. I would make some kind of throw-away remark about something that was happening in the world, and he would say, "What did you say?" Would you repeat that? That's very important." And I would repeat it. And he would say, "Great. Come," and we would go to the typewriter. And out would come so many pages of dictation. Now, I defy any young woman not to be absolutely tied to a person she could inspire with some off-handed remark.
VY: It makes you feel very important.

ZM: I never had anyone listen to me like that, who thought I was important. I was the youngest of four; my mother was much too busy to think that what we were saying was terribly important. And even if she did, European parents didn't pat you on the back like American parents, because that might make your head blow up.

VY: Were you attracted to him right away?

ZM: Absolutely. To his mind, especially. He was a very exciting person to be with. And he was a fun person. He also had a dark side, of course. Don't we all? But that you only get to learn gradually, don't you, the dark side.

The Master's Dark Side

VY: What were some of the crazy, flamboyant, things he did? His dark side, as you say.

ZM: He would fight people. I thought he spent a lot of energy fighting. But some of it is motivated because he was so anti-Freudian—and at the time, everybody was Freudian. So that anybody who was anti-Freudian was an enemy, or an outcast. And they would pooh-pooh his ideas. But they would take them, just the same, without giving him credit. That is still happening today. And that would hurt him, and he would get very obstreperous about that. I think he spent a lot more time and energy that might have been saved to do other things. But that was the way he was. Some of his concern was correct. Some of it may have been a little bit magnified in his mind, because he had so little support. I think he got quite frantic at times that he wasn't being really heard. There was another problem. When I heard him lecturing, I knew that he wasn't being heard. He was talking above people's heads. I made up with mind when I first saw him working with psychotic patients. No one was working actively with psychotic patients at that time. I'm talking about early '40s. And I remember thinking to myself, "I'm never going to be able to be a director. I'll never know enough, I'll never be smart enough."

VY: A psychodrama director?

ZM: Yes. Never. I'll be a therapeutic actor, that's all. But I'll also be his interpreter, because he needs interpretation. He needs to be brought down to a level where people can understand. He has an important message, and it's not getting through.
VY: He had a hard time communicating to the common folk.

ZM: And that's really what happened. My writing, they tell me, is more cogent. His writing is very dense, very heavy, very charged, very Germanic. Every sentence is loaded with ideas.

VY: So you were translating his ideas into a form that could be better understood.

ZM: Yes, the more I learned, the more I got into the work, the more readable his books became.

VY: And you became more involved in directing yourself.

ZM: I became more involved, and finally married him in 1949.

VY: How long did that take?

ZM: Eight years.

VY: And you were in love with him all that time.

ZM: You know, I've often thought, I was not "in love" with him. I loved him. There's a difference. I adored him. I loved him. I don't think I was "in love" with him. That's an entirely different feeling. I know what the difference is. I've been "in love." This was more important than being in love. My older brother used to say, "I know what love means; it's the thing you fall in and out of." It was not like that. It was a very steady love. He said to me one day, "Our relationship is largely built on faith: faith in each other." And I think that was true.

So I began to learn to the method. I had seven years of apprenticeship. And that's what you had in the old days when you went to a master, as an artist. You studied for seven years.

VY: Really? What was it about seven?

ZM: I don't know. But you went and had at least seven years of apprenticeship before you could become an actual artist.

VY: That's about what it takes many people to get a Ph.D.

ZM: That's right.
VY: After you get that, at least in our field, then you start learning a little bit about therapy.

ZM: Well, I learned it as I went along, fortunately. What struck me about psychodrama was the combination of science and art. That's what I loved about it.

VY: Where was the science? The art is obvious.

ZM: Well, there's a lot of technical stuff to learn, obviously. Method, theory, ideas.

VY: You have learned it well, really. The student has turned instructor.

ZM: To become passionate about such learning, to immerse oneself in such a path, has made life a wonderful journey for me.

VY: Thanks for letting me and those who read this in it. Your passion and energy for your life and work are infectious.

ZM: Thank you, I have enjoyed it.

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Zerka Moreno, TEP, along with her late husband, J.L. Moreno, developed the theory and practice of psychodrama. Zerka has taught psychodrama worldwide for more than 30 years since J.L. Moreno's death and is recognized as a leader in further realizing his vision. Her research and writing can now be found in a collection, The Quintessential Zerka: Writings by Zerka T. Moreno on Psychodrama, Sociometry and Group Psychotherapy.

Victor Yalom, PhD is the founder, president and resident cartoonist of Psychotherapy.net. He also maintains a part-time practice in individual, group and couples therapy in San Francisco and Mill Valley. He has conducted workshops in existential-humanistic and group therapy in the US, Mexico, and China, and also leads ongoing consultation groups for therapists.

CE credits: 1

Learning objectives: • Become aware of the important historical points in the development of psychodrama.
• Develop knowledge of the key principles of psychodrama.
• Understand the relationship between spontaneity and creativity and the therapeutic value of psychodrama.