SEARCHING FOR SPOLIN IN DRAMA THERAPY

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ABSTRACT

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This paper asks the question “How have the life, practices, and works of Viola Spolin influenced, and been influenced by, the field of Drama Therapy and its practices?” This paper will explore the life, theories, and practices of Viola Spolin and clarify their relationship to the field of Drama Therapy. In this research I will use the method of historical-documentary research, first to show the crucial elements of Spolin’s life and theories, and then to connect them to the larger field of drama therapy. This will show the influence that drama therapy ideas had on Spolin, as well as the influence that Spolin had on the field of drama therapy. I will also show some brief examples of how Spolin’s games are currently used in research within the field of drama therapy.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

In 2007, at the age of nineteen, I began taking improvisational theatre classes at The Second City Training Centre in Toronto, Canada. What led me to this decision was not an appetite for fame or a belief in my own comedic ability but a last-ditch effort to combat a lifetime of social anxiety that was greatly impinging on my day to day life. What I found at The Second City was unlike anything I imagined. While it was slow progress, and often humiliatingly difficult, the games that I encountered eventually provided me with the tools I needed to embrace my own inner strength and creativity and trust myself that I could cope with the challenges that a social world may throw at me. The games that were used in these classes were presented as fun exercises to get us better at creating scenes but they were so much more than that. The games allowed each player a frame to trust themselves and react spontaneously and creatively in a safe environment where the fun element was so present that there was always positive feedback. This was an environment where one could do no wrong, every word and choice was seen as great and gave the next person something new to which to respond. I very quickly felt the healing effects of these improvisational games. The effects were not isolated to the improv studio or the acting exercises, but were brought out with me into my day-to-day life. The mental health changes that were occurring in the studio was reverberating through every interaction I was having in my life.

These games were not just freeing up an ability to act but were freeing up blocks that I had been putting around myself for years. In *Improvisation for the Theater,* Spolin (1999) wrote about the experience of the blocks that players live through, before training. “Trying to save ourselves from attack, we build a mighty fortress and are timid, or we fight each time we venture forth” (p. 7). This is exactly how I had felt. I had created a fortress with many layers to protect

myself from judgement, vulnerabilities and feelings of failure. When I had to interact, I felt like my whole self was under attack and my desire for protection would make me unable to truly be with anyone else. The improv games showed me that these walls were not actually keeping me safe. They were negatively affecting my life and relationships. Improv games forced me into situations where I was unable to protect myself in my usual manner; the rules of the games made it so I could not hide in a corner or refuse to engage. The teamwork elements of the games meant that I could not shoulder all the responsibility and therefore could not ensure my own social safety. I had to rely on others in a way that was terrifying, but my trust grew as I embraced the lack of control and saw the beauty in truly collaborating with others. A crucial element was the fun inherent in the games; the positive feelings and shared laughter in the room made the vulnerability and failures easier. Mistakes became a badge of courage, proof that one did something they hadn't already practiced and perfected, that brought joy to the room. Improv showed me that it is not only through hardships that we grow, but if we give credit to the moments of joy and laughter, we could use those moments to expand our abilities and capacity for a positive self.

In due time I graduated from the basic improv program, the conservatory program, and began to teach and perform with the faculty at the training centre. The training had provided me with such startling growth and leaps in my mental health that it was noticed by not only myself but others in the centre. I was then asked to run workshops based on my own experience of improvisation helping social anxiety. As I began to teach others the games that I had found most helpful in my growth, I became curious about the history and theories of why these improv games and theatre can be so incredibly beneficial for those suffering in their mental health. In my exploration, I was shocked to find that there was already a field devoted to the study of the

healing power of theatre and drama. Like many others that I was later to find in the field, my experience of the incredible power of theatre came before my knowledge that there were others that had also felt this way. Improv games had taught me that there is a benefit of leaving the comfort of the familiar, and stretching towards the fear of the unknown, so I left Toronto and travelled to New York to study at the drama therapy program at New York University. My studies in NYU brought me an understanding and a language to fully recognize the experience that I had at Second City. I began to see that my relationship to the theatre was not a unique happy accident but a real growth that could be explained through the illumination of those drama therapists that have devised theories and practices to best effect this positive growth. I continued my studies of drama therapy in the Creative Arts Program at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Here I was given the opportunity to further study the ideas of theatre and health as well as given a chance to actively explore this through practicum placements. Through all of this, what was once my own subjective experience of theatre helping me through a personal challenge turned into an understanding of the objective way that theatre can help others as well.

In my studies, I never forgot about the improvisation games that helped me immensely and started me on the journey of exploration in this field. As my understanding of theatre and therapy grew, I was always led back to the relationship of the games that I played in a school meant for actor training, and the growth that I had felt playing those games. The more I learned about the games and the history of how and why they were devised, the more I understood the powerful connection between the originator of those games, Viola Spolin, and the idea of a healing art of theatre. This journey that has at long last led me here to study the story of the woman who started the games that led to the improv theatres that helped me so much, and to attempt to find her place within the world of drama therapy. I hope that the improv games and

theatre that helped me so much will be better understood as a therapeutic tool which can help others as well.

This work is especially beneficial at this time. Improv theatre across the world has seen a large growth in numbers in recent years. Two theatres with which I have studied, Second City Toronto and The Upright Citizens Brigade in New York, have grown from training centres with students in the hundreds to institutions with students in the thousands, in the brief amount of time since I have attended them. Many institutions, such as Second City, have begun to tout the therapeutic effects of improv and have been selling their classes as such. Each month there seems to be a new article about how improv can help one's life, business, relationship, or provide growth in multiple areas. Multiple Improvisation for Autism Spectrum Disorder programs have popped up in North America; there is even an Improv and Mental Health conference in Chicago, U.S.A. At this time, many of these programs are within the domain of improv theatres and taught by improv teachers that have solely been trained in improvisation. I hope this research helps move improv for growth classes out of the realm of theatre that happens to be therapeutic and into the world of the field of drama therapy. Popular culture is primed for drama therapists that can use Spolin's improv games in their practice to reach a public that is ready and can be reached through this therapeutic means. I hope that my work will provide the historical framework for practitioners that would like to work therapeutically with the games of Viola Spolin.

Chapter 2. Methodology

The methodology that this paper will use is Historical-Documentary Research. The *Art Therapy & Drama Therapy Research Handbook* (2015), used in Concordia University's Creative Arts Therapies Master's programs, describes this method as "delineating interrelationships between various fields in an historical context" (p. 7). I plan to delineate the relationship between the field of improvisational theatre and its originator, with the field of drama therapy using the shared history and theories between the two fields. Through this method, I will explore the life, theories, works, and practices of Viola Spolin and clarify the relationship between Spolin and the field of drama therapy. This method will be used to show the overlap between Spolin and the field, the influence they had on one another, as well as the moments when boundaries were delineated to separate one from the other. This will show the importance of Spolin's improvisation games to the field of drama therapy as well as the role of therapy in the games of Viola Spolin.

Chapter 3. Viola Spolin

The Early Years

Viola Mills Spolin was born November 07, 1906, in Chicago, Illinois. In 1924 she began her training as a settlement worker, studying with Neva Boyd at Boyd's Group Work School in Chicago, though she had not yet finished high school. Spolin's experience with Boyd was profound (Moffit 1989).

Spolin (1999) in her book, *Improvisation for the Theater*, writes of her experience with Neva Boyd and the effect that it had upon her life and her work:

> From 1924 to 1927 as her student at her house, I received from her an extraordinary training in the use of games, story-telling, folk-dance, and dramatics as tools for stimulating creative expression in both children and adults, through self-discovery and personal experiencing. The effects of her inspiration never left me for a single day. (p. xlvii)

Boyd was a pioneer in the exploration of the constructive potential of play. Boyd worked with immigrant children and led them in games meant to help them adjust to society. This was the first interaction that Spolin would have with theatre as a pathway to health. (Sweet 1987).

In 1931 Spolin travelled to New York to try to make it as an actor, studying with the recently formed Group Theater, but not appearing in any of their performances. Spolin then returned to Chicago as she missed her young child. In 1939, Spolin began to work as the drama supervisor for the Chicago branch of the Works Progress Administration's Recreational Project in the Hull house settlement house (Sweet 2011).

The Hull House

The Hull House was where Spolin returned to working with immigrant children and adults. Spolin's work was not only meant to be theatre training or entertainment, but meant to be helpful in a therapeutic manner. Steitzer (2011) writes:

> Spolin was an actor by trade but employed dual purpose with her initial theatre instruction: these groups did not just help members to master acting skills, but also helped members to develop confidence in their ability to speak up on their own behalf. The groups began to find that they were best able to accomplish this goal when they were improvising. Improv training was not a way to force "proper" behavior upon participants but a means for players to gain deeper insight into their own true self-worth and a true appreciation for group process and mutual aid. (p. 72)

At the Hull House Spolin built upon her training with Neva Boyd to create a series of improvisational games to help the youths with whom she worked. Boyd had shown that games could help children grow through the catalyst of play. Spolin continued in this direction by developing games that kept true to Boyd's idea of play as a catalyst for change and added the theatre element with which she had become acquainted while training as an actor. Spolin designed her games to encourage creativity, grow self-expression, and self-realization. Spolin's idea, built off of Boyd, was that if a theatre situation was transformed into a game, the player would focus their energy on playing the game and will therefore lose any self-consciousness and therefore play the scene naturally and spontaneously.

Moffit (1989) writes about how Spolin created her collection of games as a means to help the players in her group:

> Spolin perceived a need for an easily grasped system of theater training that could cross the cultural and ethnic barriers within the WPA Project. Building upon the experience of Boyd's work, she responded by developing new games that focused upon individual; creativity, adapting and focusing the concept of play to unlock the individual's capacity for creative self-expression. (p. 816)

Stevens (2010) also describes Spolin's work at this time at the Hull House. Stevens gave a clarification between Spolin games and the games as the reader may understand them, as well as stating Spolin's desired audience for her work:

> Spolin began to develop her ideas about improvisation in 1938 when she became the supervisor of drama for the Works Progress Administration during the New Deal. There, she organized a number of improvisational theatre groups, and devised a series of "games" in which play was "the catalyst for self-expression and self-realization." These were not "games" in the sense that students/actors might "win", but rather a way of resolving a given "theatre problem" by working together, creating a performance solely by reacting to each other. Spolin's text is most directly aimed at instructors of improvisational theatre. (p. 27)

Steitzer (2011) in her history of Social work and improvisation writes that the settlement houses, such as the Hull House in Chicago, are also where the American social work tradition began. At the start improvisation games and social work had much in common but as improvisation games moved away from the original therapeutic purposes with which Spolin had used them and towards a lucrative entertainment business, much of the commonality was lost. During her work at the Hull house, Spolin was able to create a cohesive theory about her improvisation games and create an enormous compendium of improv games. These games were

developed as she would encounter moments in the studio where a specific block or need would show itself and she would create a game on the spot to deal with the issue. The thoughts and games developed in these years would form the basis and content that would later show up in her landmark book*, Improvisation for the Theatre*, and cause her to be dubbed the "godmother of improvisation" (Stewart 2016 p. 15).

Hollywood and The Second City

In 1946 Spolin moved to Los Angeles and founded The Young Actors Company, where she continued to develop and use her improvisation games while training young actors for the stage. In 1955 Spolin returned to Chicago and began to work with The Playwright's Theatre Club and The Compass players. In 1960 she began to work with The Second City, a new theater that was being opened by her son, Paul Sills. It was during this time that Spolin wrote and published her book, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, that would become a classic reference text in American theatre (Moffit, 1989).

Steitzer (2011) sees this time in Spolin's life as the perceived split between Spolin and the world of social work and therapy:

> As improv spread in popularity as a comedic art form, it moved further and further from Spolin's original philosophy and purpose... This is a huge departure from the genre's settlement house roots. As improv became a more mainstream form of comedic entertainment, it lost the dual purpose initially envisioned by Spolin. Although Spolin's improv classes sought to teach socialization skills, to build the confidence of performers, and to foster community, today, many groups focus solely on being funny. Although the historical connection between these two fields runs deep, therefore, they have lost their connection to one another. (p. 272)

It is a debated question as to how therapeutic Spolin considered her games to be. While working at the Hull House Spolin was clear that her aim was not just to create good actors. Feldman (1974) gives a brief history of improvisation in America and describes Spolin's work as such:

> The early games and improvisations dealt with the problems of the neighborhood in which the people who attended Settlement House lived. Ms. Spolin called her work 'Recreational Theatre,' although she has acknowledged that it has also been called 'Sociodrama'. (p. 128)

In 1955 Spolin returned to Chicago and helped her son Paul Sills by conducting workshops with his new theatre, The Compass Players. From 1960 to 1965, Spolin worked as workshop director for her son's newly opened theatre, The Second City. Before the writing of her book in 1963, Spolin had been greatly influenced by her experience witnessing her son's work at The Second City in Chicago (Spolin, 1999).

This meant that in the writing of her book Spolin had moved away from the sole influence of Boyd and her work at the Hull House and was writing for an audience of the more lucrative entertainment business of comedy improvisation and actor training. This non-therapeutic focus of her writings has caused some debate about whether Spolin meant her work to be *therapeutic*. Although the book's focus on improvisation as a training tool for actors and not an exploration on self-realization took it away from the field of therapy, it solidified her standing as the originator of American theatre improvisation. Her book became the bible of the soon-to-be burgeoning improv theatre world in the United States. Her son Paul Sills took her work further into the public perception by creating The Compass Players and, then, The Second City, two theatres that would do wonders in transmitting the ideas of Spolin to generations of

aspiring actors, comedians, as well as those looking to explore their own creativity. These two theatres would launch the careers of many of the most famous actors, directors, and writers and, so, solidify Spolin's work and the idea of improvisation to the world (Sweet, 1987).

After 1965 Spolin moved back to Los Angeles, though she would often be brought to Chicago and New York to facilitate improvisational workshops. On November 22nd, 1994 Viola Spolin died at the age of 88 at her home in Los Angeles (Gussow, 1994).

By this time, though, her origins as a settlement worker and the growth of her games as a tool for self-realization and social health had been greatly overshadowed by her work in creating improvisation training for the entertainment world in America.

Therapeutic or Therapy?

Due to the great influence that Spolin had on the world of popular theatre through her work with the theatres of her son, her subsequent books were generally geared to that audience. This meant that Spolin's thoughts about whether the games themselves were therapeutic were never fully established. Instead it was left to others after her to analyze her thoughts on the subject.

Jonathan Moreno (2014) in the book *Impromptu Man* tried to reconcile the ideas of his father and Spolin. He reports a conversation he had with one of Spolin's early students: "The actor and director Andrew Harmon, a Spolin protégé, told me that she regarded her approach to theater as therapeutic, but not as therapy. Spolin certainly saw the value of theater as training in spontaneity" (p. 108).

Fox (1994) also quotes a conversation he had with one of Spolin's students. Valerie Harper, saying about Spolin, "Her work is for anybody, for everybody. It's therapeutic, though not therapy. She doesn't want it in any way compared to psychodrama" (p. 68).

Spolin herself must have understood that even if she did not envision her work as therapy, there was a world outside of her that did consider it so. Spolin was approached by Gertrude Schattner and Richard Courtney, two original pillars of the drama therapy field, to write a chapter in their upcoming book, *Drama in Therapy Volume Two* (1981). It is clear that this book is a drama therapy text. In the preface, they write, "This book is a collection of papers about drama therapy" (p. xiii). One can think of no clearer statement. To Schattner and Courtney, the chapters in *Drama in Therapy Volume II* are drama therapy papers. One would imagine that Spolin was aware of this central theme of the book and still wrote her chapter accordingly. In her chapter Spolin continues to stand on the dividing line between therapy and therapeutic theatre, arguing that her theatre is not therapy, though it is therapeutic. Spolin (1981) writes:

> Although used extensively by many therapists to help people with emotional, mental, or physical handicaps, please understand that, even in the therapeutic situation, theater games are a process (play) and should be entered into for the joy of playing, without interpretation, while they are taking place. (p. 214)

We see that Spolin is firm in her belief that her games are not essentially therapy. But Spolin did knowingly join a group of drama therapists to write a chapter in a drama therapy book, and one might see this as a tacit approval of the connection that was being forged between Spolin's work and the drama therapy world.

Although it is debatable whether Spolin herself saw her improv games as therapy, it was definitely seen by those who came after her as a great source to be taken into the therapeutic sphere. Frost & Yarrow (2015) clearly saw that Spolin's improvisation games did not just make one a better actor but could facilitate growth outside of the theatre as well: "what all this taken

together indicates is that major elements of improvisation practice are perceived as developmentally productive for actors in society as well as those in theatre" (p. 44).

Stevens (2010) in a description of Spolin's work definitely sees the work as a form of therapy and sees proof in the writings of Spolin, even if Spolin never fully framed her games in this way:

> For Spolin, people/actors should slough off repressive inhibitions and embrace being present to their own lives: 'Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings.' Thus, by working spontaneously, improvisation is a form of therapy for the performer. (p. 40)

Sally Bailey (2016) in her chapter "Ancient and Modern Roots of Drama Therapy" describes, amongst other ideas, the "Social Roots of Drama Therapy" (p. 215). Bailey notes "Viola Spolin, learned Boyd's techniques and developed them further, writing the widely studied *Improvisation for the Theatre*, from which many theatre games and improvisation techniques used in American theatre training and in drama therapy originated" (p. 216). Bailey also later refers to "Viola Spolin and the American theatre educators who developed into the first drama therapists" (p. 218). While this "label" of drama therapist for someone such as Spolin is a hypothetical and retroactive designation, it is interesting that Bailey refers to Spolin in a group of the first drama therapists.

With the fine line between a game being therapeutic or therapy, it is likely that this argument will continue to be waged and remain unresolved. Spolin seems to have seen the growth of her player's mental health but was reluctant to move her practice into the realm of

therapy. Spolin saw herself solidly entrenched in the world of theatre and acting training, but the undeniable elements of the therapeutic nature of her games have caused much of her work to be found in the therapy world as well.

Chapter 4. Spolin and Moreno

An Influence

Any writing on the history and formation of the field of drama therapy must begin with the work of Jacob Levy Moreno, the creator of Psychodrama, Sociometry, the Theatre of Spontaneity and many other fields. Moreno saw the potential of theatre as a means toward psychological healing and growth, an idea that would be mirrored and enlarged by the field of drama therapy.

Johnson (2009) refers to J.L. Moreno as The Creator. He writes "This visionary single-handedly discovered drama therapy in the 1920's" (p. 5). Johnson notes that Moreno's writings give a strong foundation to the field of drama therapy. Over time a breach was opened between the original theatrical roots of psychodrama and the current practice of it, which Moreno had written to reach his audience of psychiatric colleagues. Johnson believes that this breach is the one in which drama therapists jumped and began the work to differentiate between Moreno's psychodrama and the continued field of drama therapy.

Bailey (2006) writes of the critical role that J.L Moreno played in the development of drama therapy. Bailey writes that purists in both fields would argue that there is a separation between the two fields "but there is truth to the idea that Moreno was the first drama therapist" (p. 218). Bailey writes that in her view psychodrama is part of the toolbox of a drama therapist and "Therefore, it's story rightfully belongs as part of the drama therapy history" (p. 218).

Chesner (1994) discusses the similarities and differences between Spolin's psychodrama and the field of drama therapy. She notes that there are many ideas that cross over the divide between drama therapy and psychodrama describing both as stemming from "common roots in the dramatic tradition" (p. 131). The main similarity is the integral use of drama in both fields. Chesner writes: "A participant in either a dramatherapy or psychodrama session can expect

elements of the dramatic idiom to be present in the experience" (p. 115). A second similarity noted is the use of the body in the therapeutic drama. Chesner writes: "In both drama therapy and psychodrama the physicality of the experience brings the emotions and the unconscious onto the therapeutic stage" (p. 115). Other similarities are noted, such as the use of therapeutic space, the use of dreams and other projective techniques, and the use of roles. Chesner continues to write of the differentiations between the two fields, these are the difference of the group therapy, where psychodrama centres on one person and drama therapy can focus on an entire group, that drama therapy draws on a larger range of methods, the pace of the therapeutic process, the relationship with the group, and the role of the therapist.

There is no mention of Jacob Levy Moreno by name in any of Spolin's writings. It is hard to believe that Spolin was not aware of Moreno's work while originating her ideas of improvisation. There are many ways in which Spolin's work mirrors Moreno's and many ways in which it seems to incorporate, or at least be influenced, by the thoughts of Moreno. Both Spolin and Moreno were inspired to create their theatre by watching the play of children. Both Spolin and Moreno put spontaneity at the centre of their constructs. They also both abolish the playwright, and incorporate the audience into the show. While the similarities are many, there is no concrete written evidence that Spolin was influenced by the writings of Moreno. There is conjecture and possible oral transmissions about the influence, which we will explore in this chapter.

Sawyer (2003) attempts to trace the history of improvisational theatre and drama therapy but comes up against the lack of any clear connection:

> There is no evidence in the historical record that any of the original Chicago improvisers were familiar with Copeau or Moreno. Yet because the ideas of these directors were so

> pervasive, they indirectly influenced Chicago improvisation. For example, the first Compass Players' show included a Living Newspaper, but none of the actors ever credited Moreno with the innovation. (p. 20)

Sawyer takes the route that many other researchers have taken, and continues to take. While the written evidence is not clear, the similarities are so clear and the overlap so large, that the ideas themselves show there must have been an unacknowledged influence on Spolin and the next generation of improvisational theorists that learned from her.

Sawyer does claim a direct acknowledgement by Spolin for Moreno, though he is not incredibly clear on the acknowledgement:

> Spolin acknowledged the influence of Moreno on her work, once describing it using Moreno's term sociodrama. Spolin's original goals for her exercises were explicitly therapeutic rather than dramatic. She drew heavily on Moreno's innovation of basing improvisations on audience suggestions and through her, this technique became a hallmark on Chicago improv. (p. 22)

It is unclear if Sawyer is presenting firsthand knowledge of an acknowledgement by Spolin or if he is basing the acknowledgement entirely on Spolin's use of the term sociodrama. Either way this quotation of Sawyer is often brought up when one is arguing of Moreno's influence on Spolin. Sawyer notes that Spolin uses the term Sociodrama to describe her work. Moreno had created Sociodrama, a method in which a group of individuals educationally enact social situations that have been experienced. Using this term that was coined and made famous by Moreno showed that Spolin must have been aware of Moreno and his work. If this is true that Spolin was aware of Moreno's work, she must have realized the similarities between the two

theories, which makes it more surprising that Moreno is never mentioned in any of Spolin's writings.

We do see, though, that even while acknowledging the lack of evidence Sawyer continues to draw the line of influence from one to the other:

> Moreno had an indirect but nonetheless pervasive influence on twentieth-century theater by the 1950s. Their innovations had become a part of European and American theater culture… By the 1930s, Moreno had trained many disciples in the technique of psychodrama, and these techniques were widely known in major cities in the United States and Europe. (p. 20)

So, while Sawyer does mention the lack of direct acknowledgement, he clearly sees too much evidence to believe that Spolin was unaware of Moreno and his pioneering work.

Scheiffele (1995) also sees a huge overlap between Spolin and Moreno that he believes indicates a direct influence. More than just a perceived influence, Scheifele writes that Zerka Moreno, the wife and collaborator of Jacob Levy Moreno, mentioned to him that Spolin did acknowledge Moreno's influence. Scheiffele writes, "According to Zerka Moreno, she acknowledged Moreno's influence, but further research needs to be done" (p. 193). Here we have a direct attribution of Moreno's influence on Spolin but Scheiffele himself quickly adds that more research needs to be done on this. Even with Zerka Moreno's statement, the lack of any written acknowledgement makes him unable to rely fully on the statement without further research.

Jonathan Moreno (2014) also draws what he sees as the influence his father, Jacob Levy Moreno, had on Spolin. After quoting the lines from Sawyer above, Moreno provides two other possibilities towards the connection of Moreno and Spolin. One possibility of a way in which

Spolin had been influenced by Moreno can be found in an interview with Spolin's son Paul Sills. In the interview, Sills is talking about how his theatre was the first of its kind in presenting an improvised performance for an audience. While arguing that it was different from anything that came before it, Sills mentions that there are people who say it happened in Zurich a long time ago. Moreno notes, "The otherwise inexplicable offhand reference to Zurich might have been an unconscious association to odd bits of information he got from his mother about Vienna and J.L." (p. 109). Although this isn't concrete proof that Spolin had mentioned J.L. Moreno and the theatre of spontaneity to her son, Paul Sills, Jonathan Moreno clearly sees this as a possible reference to his father's work.

A Shared Student

Jonathan Moreno also recounts a second possibility. In this second possibility, Moreno posits that perhaps it was a student that studied with both Spolin and J. L. Moreno, which proves that they must have had some knowledge of each other. Moreno writes:

> He might have also known about psychodrama from the clinical psychologist James Sacks, a backstage observer of The Compass, Elaine May's boyfriend, and later one of J.L's favorite students when he was part of the core group of psychodramatists in New York. Sacks brought Spolin's theater games to his psychodrama work. (p. 109)

The fact that Moreno and Spolin shared students would seem to indicate that at some point Moreno and Spolin had a knowledge of each other and may have noticed a kindred nature in their two theories.

This idea of James Sacks being the conduit between Moreno and Spolin is also proposed by another drama therapist in a published discussion of professionals in the field at York University in England. Casson (1996) notes that in this discussion Marcia Karp states:

> My thinking is that one of Moreno's disciples was a man called Jim Sachs who worked with Mike Nichols, the film director, and Elaine May a commedienne, in the compass theatre in Chicago which then became Second City, which is an improvisational group and Viola Spolin was head of the group, you know who was a great drama (person). Viola Spolin had developed all these theatre games. Jim Sachs was one of her students and also a Moreno disciple so all the other guys became actors and comedians and Jim Sachs became a psychodramatist, taking Viola Spolin's work into the psychodrama. (p. 24)

Here we see another proposal that James Sacks (misspelled in the transcript of the discussion) provided a connection between Moreno and Spolin. The fact that there was overlap in the students of these two individuals is not surprising, due to the nature of their work. The likelihood that they knew of one another and the work which the other was doing is quite large.

Spolin and Psychodrama

Another proposed proof of Spolin's knowledge of Moreno and his ideas, is her use of the term Psychodrama. The word Psychodrama was coined by Moreno and described an idea that he originated. Spolin was obviously aware of Psychodrama as it appears multiple times in her book *Improvisation for the theatre*, though not always in a positive way.

Fox (1994), sees this connection between Moreno and Spolin through Spolin's use of the term psychodrama. Fox notes that "One of Spolin's bad words is psychodrama" (p. 68). Fox quotes a personal conversation with Valerie Harper, a student of Spolin: "Her work is for anybody, for everybody. It's therapeutic, though not therapy. She doesn't want it in any way compared to psychodrama" (p. 68). Spolin (1999) in defining the term psychodrama calls it "Putting one's own emotion into play to create action; living story instead of 'in process'" (p.

367). Fox describes this definition as “pejorative” (p. 68) as Spolin does not necessarily see psychodrama as a positive idea in her theater of improvisation.

It is true that Spolin does not seem to be overly fond of psychodrama. Spolin (1999) describes her idea that the players should commit to the imagined reality during the game and in this way experience emotions in the then-and-there instead of living out old emotions. She then contrasts this idea to psychodrama:

> This prevents psychodrama from appearing on either side of the stage, for psychodrama is a vehicle specially designed for therapeutic reasons to abstract old emotions from the participating members and put them into a dramatic situation to examine them and so release the individual from personal problems. (p. 220)

We see that Spolin’s knowledge of psychodrama is quite extensive and it seems clear that she has a working knowledge of psychodrama and how it works. It is quite natural to believe that if she had knowledge of psychodrama, that she also had knowledge of Moreno and his ideas.

Moreno and Spolin, Kindred Theorists

Scheiffele (1995) discusses that there is much overlap and complementing ideas that can be seen between Moreno and Spolin. Spolin and Moreno both desired an actor that was not beholden to a script but instead acting within the moment and improvising. Scheiffele notes that “Moreno’s ideal actor is not the conventional, perfectionist actor who gives the exact same performance every night...but rather the actor who is always living in the moment, always fresh and different” (p. 170). This is seen similarly in Spolin’s ideas, as she desires not an actor reading from a script but a player improvising and spontaneously creating a scene in the moment. Scheiffele describes Moreno’s desire for the elimination of the playwright in theatre. Moreno

wanted a theatre fully based in spontaneity and not one where the material was set by the writer. Spolin also envisioned a theatre where there was no playwright.

Scheiffele also adds that Moreno was inspired in his ideas by watching young children at play. He saw the children at play with the freedom and creativity to act in a truly spontaneous way and understood that to help his patients he would need to help them reach that childlike spontaneity. Scheiffele writes: “Since as children we are naturally spontaneous, Moreno sees the training of spontaneity foremost as an unlearning of the blocks we have obtained through our upbringing” (p. 171). Moreno sees that as children age, they attain blocks to their creativity that must be unlearned for them to be fully spontaneous. Spolin similarly sees her games as an attempt to return to the play of children. Spolin describes the blocks that children obtain through the judgements of the adults and the world around them and the negative effects that it has on the children's natural creativity. Spolin explains that children learn to be concerned about what others think and internalize the views of others. This self-judgment and submission to the authority of others causes them to no longer be able to act spontaneously. Just like Moreno’s ideas of unlearning the blocks obtained in upbringing, Spolin believes we must all unlearn our fear and expectation of judgment and re-embrace the spontaneity we had as children. Spolin writes: “Categorized ‘good’ or ‘bad’ at birth (a ‘good’ baby does not cry too much) we become so enmeshed with the tenuous threads of approval/disapproval that we are creatively paralyzed. We see with others’ eyes and smell with others’ noses” (p. 7). Spolin continues “We lose the ability to be organically involved in a problem, and in a disconnected way, we function with only parts of our total selves… self-identity is obscured, our bodies become misshapen, and learning is affected...and insight is lost to us” (p. 7).

Spolin believed that the way society raised children, to fear being judged and categorized as bad and instead striving to find themselves 'good' in the eyes of others, caused them to lose their natural creativity and this makes them unable to react spontaneously as it might earn them the negative judgements of others. This is similar to Moreno who saw the blocks to spontaneity in the upbringing of children and hoped to return them to their original spontaneous state.

Seeing the amount of overlap, and unable to explain it as a coincidence, Scheiffele concludes by drawing the line of influence from Moreno to Spolin and then continuing to the next generation:

> The other line of influence proceeds… from Moreno through Viola Spolin who influenced generations of actors and educators with her landmark book *Improvisation for the Theater* and through her work with the actors of the legendary Compass and The Second City companies in Chicago, who have subsequently inspired much of contemporary professional comic and improvisational acting in theatre and film. (p. 248)

Scheiffele notes this influence while still calling for more research that needs to be done to solidify the knowledge of this influence**:** "More research still needs to be done, especially on Moreno's connection with the Group Theatre and Viola Spolin" (p. 189).

Moreno, Spolin, and the Group Theatre

A final way in which the paths of Moreno and Spolin may have crossed is posited by the author of this research paper. Although this author can find no published account, it is this author's belief that Spolin was influenced by Moreno and possibly even had the potential to meet him, through The Group Theater in New York City. The Group Theatre was considered one of the most important American theater companies; it is considered responsible for popularizing

Stanislavsky's method acting, and included Elia Kazan, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, John Garfield, Clifford Odets and many other theater luminaries (Scheiffele 1995).

Jeffrey Sweet, the author of *Something Wonderful Right Away* (1987) interviewed Spolin for his book, though the interview was not included in the book, nor ever published. In reference to this interview, Sweet (2010) discusses Spolin's acting training. Sweet writes that Spolin's original interest in the theater was as an actress, though her career eventually took her in different directions. Sweet notes that Spolin travelled to New York and studied with The Group Theater and though she never acted in any of their plays, she continued to have interactions and communication with the theatre and their alumni once she returned to Chicago and later moved to Los Angeles. Sweet writes:

> The desire to pursue acting led Viola to try her luck in New York in 1931. She didn't manage to launch her career there, but she spent much of her time studying with members of the Group Theatre...Viola didn't act in any of the Group's productions, but she was attracted to their vision of ensemble work. She maintained ties with its members after she left New York. One of Paul Sills' childhood memories was of Group actors Morris Carnovsky, Stella Adler and John Garfield visiting when they were passing through Chicago, some years later. Later, when she was living in Los Angeles, she would get together with Group alumni when movie work brought them west. (pp. 30-31)

Moreno also had dealings with The Group Theater and its members both before and during the time Spolin was in New York. Moreno ran workshops and at times even hosted some members for psychodrama events at his theatre. Moreno (2014) writes about his father's influence on The Group Theater:

> He became involved with one of the most influential theatre companies in history, the Group Theatre… The Group Theatre's immediate predecessor was Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre, where in 1930 J.L. conducted spontaneity exercises. There he met theater greats Elia Kazan and Stella and Luther Adler. (p. 105)

Jonathan Moreno also writes "Scholars of the innovative theater scene of the era agree that J.L.'s influence on the Group Theater...was substantial. Group Theater member and actor's studio cofounder Elia Kazan...is said to have used psychodrama in rehearsals" (p. 107).

Scheiffele (1995) mentions Moreno's considerable connection to the Group Theater as well. He notes:

> The Group Theatre (New York, 1931-1941) is often considered the most important American theatre company, especially recognized for bringing Stanislavsky's system to America. Like Moreno, they were known for emphasizing psychological truthfulness and immediacy. In 1930, Moreno experimented with spontaneity exercises at the Civic Repertory Theatre under Eva Le Gallienne, where he worked with actors such as John Garfield, Burgess Meredith, and Howard da Silva, who later became associated with the Group Theatre. (p. 190)

Although there is published material about Moreno's dealings and influence on the Group Theater, and there is also material on Spolin's study and dealings with the Group Theater, this author is unable to find any published material that deals with both of these connections and the possible influence that Moreno may have had on Spolin through his influence on the Group Theater and its members. It is this author's belief that this may be another way in which Spolin had heard about, if not directly heard, Moreno and his ideas. This would explain Spolin's knowledge and use of the terms psychodrama and Sociodrama in her later work. More research

would need to be done to solidify whether this influence indeed occurred, though with the passing of all directly involved, it may be forced upon the reader to rely on possibilities and conjecture.

Chapter 5. Spolin and DramaTherapy

A Perfect Fit

The question of whether Spolin's theories and games could be used in a therapeutic setting was left to the next generation of psychologists, therapists, and drama therapists. In this chapter we will explore the major concepts that are found in the works of Spolin that have found their way into the therapy world, mainly through the work of drama therapists. We will see the overlapping ideas that can be found in both the Spolin games and the therapy room. The overlap shows that the tools found in Spolin have a strong theoretical framework that backs up the action of bringing those games into the drama therapy world.

In searching for theories and tools to use in the therapy session, drama therapists have always turned to the world of theatre. Though there are many theatre practitioners that found their work being used in the field of drama therapy, Spolin was an especially perfect fit, as it gelled so well with so much of what Moreno had already written and explored in the world of Spontaneity. When Moreno's writing could only take a practitioner so far, it was easy to turn to Spolin to try and fill in any gaps. Scheiffele (1995) writes "When we look for Moreno's description of his spontaneity training, we search in vain for a sophisticated and elaborate system of exercises, such as one's developed for example by Viola Spolin" (p. 172).

This gap in the clear explanation of what spontaneity training looked like allowed Spolin's spontaneity training games to be brought in and used within the psychodrama and drama therapy field where they fit so perfectly.

Spolin and the Therapy Room

Over the years, there has been much study about how Spolin fits into the larger therapy world, as well as the more specific drama therapy world. Drama therapists have been at the forefront in the effort to recast Spolin's work within the therapy paradigm.

Kindler (2005) notes that there is a growing interest in the psychoanalytic community for improvisational workshops. While this interest has been a recent phenomenon, Kindler states that the field of drama therapy has always been aware of the connection to improvisational training, due to their experiential dealings with improvisation, Spontaneity, and theatre. Kindler specifically mentions the newly realized awareness that the therapeutic relationship between a therapist and client is very similar to the necessities between two partners in an improvisation. "There is a close relationship between the creative spontaneity required in the psychotherapy or analytic session and that which occurs in a two-person dramatic improvisation. Both are endeavors involving the imaginative collaboration of the two participants" (p. 89).

Kindler later elaborated on this parallel explaining that within the therapeutic relationship, all the rules of dramatic improvisation apply: the play space is sacred, the player must follow the lead of the other participant, the player does not challenge or deny, there should be unconditional acceptance of the other's reality, one must listen and watch carefully, and lastly, the player must clarify, enhance and facilitate the action so that the scene can move forward. She sees the psychoanalyst's new interest in improvisation, as a sign of the growing connection between the psychoanalytic and drama therapy communities.

Gale (2018) also sees numerous ways in which the Improvisations of Spolin's theatre can mirror and provide insight in the drama therapy session. Gale enumerates seven themes and skills that are present in an improvisation that helps with relational engagement. First the idea of "Yes, and." This is the idea that each player agrees, supports and adds to the choices that their partner has made before them. Second, trust; where a player fully trusts themselves and their partner in order to minimize the self-critiques and judgements. Third, deep listening; where a player does not spend their time thinking of what to say next while their partner talks, but instead

listens intently with no planning and trusting that the deep listening will stir the reaction or response when the time arrives. Fourth, letting go of mistakes, where all mistakes disappear as they are incorporated into a larger pattern and justified through the continued action. Fifth, contextual application, where the player amplifies the experience by fully being present and discovering the details in the imagined location. Sixth, problem solving, where through playing the game, the players all agree on an objective that must be accomplished or an ending to the game that must be secured. And lastly, narrative composition, where the players develop a story or a moment about the relationship of the players. Gale posits that the seven relational themes and skill found in Spolin's improvisation can be used in a drama therapy session in "Helping couples learn how to accept one another's statements (yes, and) through deep listening, attending to their own bodies responses while also suspending early certainty of knowing what the other person intends" (p. 60).

Gale goes into intense detail about how improvisational theatre has taught him about appreciating the moments and finding the material that becomes present in the therapy session. His focus in the therapy room takes an improvisational focus and he sees this as a means to reach his client and touch upon important themes that only become present with the methodologies and slowed down presence that he had developed in improvisation:

> The practices of improvisation are useful in clinical practice. Relational action, contextual amplification, problem-solving experiences, and narrative compositions provide clinicians with new strategies and techniques. In particular, these types of improvisational activities can help individuals better accommodate and adapt to the fluidity of rules and roles of daily living. Improvisational practices can assist people in experiencing the boundaries of familiar behaviours as they practice novel behaviours.

People can learn that their identity beliefs are not intractable scripts, but composed in social performances. This view invites the celebration of the other. Problem solving experiences… help people practice our culture's taken for granted rules and test their boundaries. It helps participants experience indexicality (Garfinkel 1967) in terms of how meaning and understanding are accomplished in social interaction. An utterance has a particular meaning because of the effect that is achieved in the interaction. New and shifting contexts are constantly being shaped and emerging through the interactions of the participants. Contextual amplification exercises are useful for therapists in attending to the small mundane details of clients' lives that can have significant clinical benefit. When we can challenge our assumptions about what we think the client's world is, and engage them to create their reality in front of us through opening up and expanding the details of their daily lives, new possibilities of solutions and client's effective resistances against problems emerge. These types of details and stories often go by very fast in clinical conversations and are not acknowledged or even recognized. Slow down the talk, be in the moment, and amplify the offered details to enrich the participant's mutual understanding. Making pattern connections, as a part of narrative compositions, is an important skill as well. Through carefully attending to what has been said, past patterns can be discovered, and new patterns created. These types of discoveries (and creations) are very important for clients creating new social identities. These improv activities are also very effective in developing creativity and spontaneity. These methods are also effective for examining how power (and racism, and sexism, etc.) is performed and accomplished. Additionally, how family stories are constructed and passed on can be viewed from an improvisational perspective. The telling of family rules, values, histories,

and the like follow interactional structures. These practices provide another way to view how some rituals are dynamic and liberating, while other rituals are static and oppressive. (p. 63)

Gale clearly sees much to take from improvisational theatre that can benefit the client in the therapy session and is very clear about the similar processes that are occurring both in improvisational theatre and in drama therapy sessions. Gale explains that the same skills that makes a good improviser on stage makes a therapist into a better therapist as well. Using the skills that one learns in improvisational theatre, and searching for the patterns and moments that make a successful improv scene can make for a successful therapy session.

In a similar fashion Ayers (2016) also makes the argument that improvisational skills can serve the therapy session in several ways. Ayers names the pertinent ideas found in Spolin's improvisations and compares them to the ideals found in the therapy session.

Firstly, the concept of 'Yes And' in improvisation means that the player must fully accept what their partner has created and add on to the idea already established. To Ayers "What this means for group therapy is that anything can move the group forward if the therapist creatively embraces what is presented. There is no good or bad; there is only what comes next" (p. 106).

A second concept in improvisation mentioned by Ayers is for a player to follow their fear. He mentions that this is also true in the therapy room: "…tolerating being off-guard is a key to therapy. New experiences are often awkward, sometimes painful and stretch group members and therapists emotionally" (p. 107).

A third idea found in improvisational theatre is for the players to focus on the relationship. Ayers notes:

> Similarly in group therapy, process is often the focus. Are people monologuing or are they in conversation? Are they listening and responding to what the other is saying, or are they too mesmerized by their own story? Both improvisation and group therapy bring us into relationship. (p. 109)

A fourth idea in improvisation is to trust the process. This means that the players should not have a goal of being entertaining or getting a laugh but instead trusting the process of the collaborative creation to bring the meaning and enjoyment. Ayers notes that in therapy:

> A focus on process means being willing to give up goal-directed behavior and constantly return to what is emerging in the present. It is a willingness to be changed by what happens. Each moment is potentially an invitation for your "character" to experience a new aspect of itself. We start to identify with ourselves as the observer of the meta-communication rather than with the communications themselves. We adapt as one structure dissipates and reorganizes into a new one, an ongoing dialogue of figure and ground. (p. 111)

A fifth improvisation idea is that mistakes are welcome, when one player makes a mistake the other players accept it and build on it to incorporate it into the larger patterns of the play. This makes a mistake disappear, as it appears to be a purposeful pattern once it continues. Ayers continues:

> Mistakes and therapeutic failures are points of rupture that have the potential to jolt the therapy forward into new ways of relating or seeing… mistakes can also foster an atmosphere of compassion and creativity. They overthrow the tyranny of the superego so that a spirit of experimentation and playfulness emerges. The freedom offered to oneself as a group therapist models how group members might treat themselves. Having

> introjected notions of what a therapist is supposed to do or say will limit the range of interventions considered possible. If mistakes, slips, and the unknown are tolerated, even celebrated, moments of healing are more likely to occur. (p. 112)

Another improvisation skill is to pay attention, stay present and listen to your partner. When a player is fully focused on their partner, they are not in their head, planning, or making assumptions but fully present to react and respond. Ayers notes:

> Contraction away from our partner and from the moment has many causes. It is often motivated by fear, a desire to impress, or, in therapy, by a desire to be helpful. It is difficult to listen attentively to another human being, to bracket "memory and desire" to discover the causes at work, but the freer we are to notice these distractions, the more we can attend to others and ourselves. (pp. 113-114)

Gale and Ayers found the connection to drama therapy in the specific rules and ideas that govern an improvisational game. Ringstrom (2010) also believes that improvisational theatre and the therapy session meet at an important crossroads. Ringstrom identifies different types of improvisation that can happen in therapy. One type is embracing moments when the client begins to play by falling into the play space and improvising with the client. This allows the client to fully enter the play space and continue the dialogue in what would amount to an improvised scene where both the therapist and client are playing obvious characters. Ringstrom notes that this could help the client explore different facets of himself and grow in his awareness.

Ringstrom continues that improvisation in therapy can allow themes and outcomes to emerge that would otherwise go unobserved. The improvisation allows the dyad to playfully build within themselves a scene that can lead them where neither would go on their own accord. Ringstrom coined the phrase, "Posi-traum," to describe a completely unexpected joyous

realization that comes from a spontaneous improvised moment in therapy. The spontaneous nature of the moment allows it to bypass any usual defenses that the client would use, as it is so far from the realm of expectation. This causes the client to assimilate the new information of self into their existing self and can cause a large amount of positive growth.

Bermant (2013) proposed the improv concept of "Yes, And..." that is fundamental to creating a healing environment. "The central tenet of improv is the unambiguous and complete support of performing partners for each other" (p. 3). He suggested that this tenet is akin to unconditional positive regard and provides a therapeutic basis for everything that happens in a group session.

Moore (2008) notes that "Improvisation can 'show us ourselves' and thus invite the possibility of change" (p. 22). Moore continues to write about spontaneity leading to self-discovery but only in a space "without fear of being judged by others for mistakes" (p. 22). Moore also notes, "That in re-staging the act of living in an improvisation exercise, self and skills can be developed by the client being both in role and in a 'meta level'" (p. 22). This meta level is a level that an improviser often finds themselves, fully playing a role but due to the fact that a script is not present, truly making the connections and dialogue presented by the self. This can be a form of Landy's (1994) Aesthetic Distancing. The role element of the improv exercise allows the client to gain some distance from themselves, as they inhabit the role or position that they were given, while still connecting with the self in order to provide the character with a voice and point of view, as well as dialogue. This allows deep emotional experiences to be presented in an improvisational exercise in a way that provides safety through the distancing that role and play provides.

Moore also notes that the Freudian idea that mistakes can be a window into the unconscious, is very present in improvisation as mistakes are supported and explored to allow the improvisation to lead to unplanned places.

Moore does warn, though, that improvisation is an art form that "benefits those who allow themselves to be propelled by the momentum of the present into an uncertain future" (p. 23) and may not be the most beneficial to avoidant clients. Moore also warns that the many decisions that one needs to make in an improvisation exercise may make it hard for "Insecure teenagers who feel safer practising within metaphor" (p. 23).

At the end of her article Moore makes a call that echoes many of the other authors attempting to study the links between improvisational theatre and dramatherapy. Moore hopes for more research specifically into improvisation as an exercise to explore autobiographical work, as they see that avenue to be especially helpful toward dramatherapy.

We see that there are many theoretical ideas that can be found in Spolin that have a direct connection to the idea of good active therapy. These ideas overlap with both the exploration of ideas and themes within therapy, the therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the client, as well as the possibility of improvisation as a goal of therapy and a signal of good health.

Chapter 6. Spolin in the Drama Therapy Session

While we have seen that the idea of Spolin can harmonize quite well with the ideas of therapy, there are drama therapists who have gone to the next level and included Spolin and her work in their drama therapy approaches, as well as used her games within the drama therapy session itself. We have seen that many Psychodramatists have extensively used Spolin's game within Psychodrama as warm-up or to establish spontaneity for the psychodrama session. Spolin's games have also been quite influential to the subsequent generations of drama therapists.

Spolin and David Read Johnson

A major influence by Spolin can be seen in the work of David Read Johnson and his creation of the drama therapy approach called Developmental Transformations (DvT). In the book used most as the introductory textbook for drama therapy, *Current Approaches to Dramatherapy* (Johnson & Emunah, 2009), Johnson names Spolin while discussing the origins for the Developmental transformations strand of drama therapy.

On several occasions, Johnson has written of the debt that his approach owes to Spolin. Johnson (1991) writes: "Transformations is an improvisational technique that was first described by Viola Spolin in her book on theatre games...I have been adapting it to therapeutic settings since 1974" (p. 290).

Johnson describes the exercise as beginning with the client and therapist choosing roles, giving each other roles, or simply moving around the room making sounds. At any point in the exercise, the client or the therapist might get inspired by their movements or sounds to transform the interaction into a new interaction by simply jumping into the role or scene that they feel it has inspired. The other member will join in the new interaction until once again one is inspired to

change. This description and Johnson's mention of Spolin is in reference to a game of Spolin's called Transformation of Relationship. When one reads Spolin's description of the game, one can see the large similarity. Spolin (1999) describes the game:

> Two players begin with a relationship (Who) and, while playing, allow Who to transform into new relationships, one after the other. The moment that a new scene emerges is also the moment of transformation….Transformation of Relationship requires a great deal of body movement and interaction for the transformation to emerge. (p. 250)

We see very clearly how similar Johnson's Developmental transformation structure is to Spolin's game of Transformation of Relationship and the great influence that Spolin's game had on Johnson's approach.

Johnson later writes about specific interventions that the therapist can use within the developmental transformation approach and, once again, we see Spolin's influence. Some of the interventions use Spolin's games and some games that have emerged in improvised theatre as a result of Spolin's work. Johnson describes the intervention called "Bracketing" where the scene is changed to make us aware that the original scene was just a photograph, a play, an audition, television show, or some other "fake" scenario. This is a tool used often in improvised theatre and is also known as "scene painting."

Another intervention is Transformations to the Here and Now. In this intervention the interaction is shifted to become the commentary of what is really going on between the client and therapist. This is similar to the game Asides, or Commentary, where the players provide the information about what is really going on in the relationship.

Johnson is clear about the influence that Spolin has had on his approach, and Johnson has become a major influence on the field of drama therapy and the drama therapists that came after

him. Emunah (1994), herself a major pillar of the drama therapy field, refers to Johnson as "One of the most prolific researchers in the field of drama therapy...The element of spontaneity, fundamental to dramatic play, is perhaps for Johnson the most critical component of drama therapy" (p. 5). Through him, Spolin's work continues to have a major effect on the field of drama therapy.

Spolin and Renee Emunah

Renee Emunah (1994) and her approach, The Five Stage Drama Therapy Model, can also be seen as a model that has been very influenced by Spolin. In Emunah's approach the client moves through five sequential phases in the therapy, though the phases are fluid and can oftentimes overlap.

Phase one is Dramatic Play, where a safe, fun environment is established; this generates spontaneity and facilitates the relationship and interaction in the room. This oftentimes involves structured improvisation and games and where we see the effect of Spolin's work in its strongest form.

Phase two is Scene Work. This is the progression from the playful improvisations of stage one to the dramatic scenes of phase two. Emunah writes that the scene work is "generally improvised though there are some therapists use existing scripts" (p. 37).

Phase three is Role Play. This shifts the therapy towards the actual lives of those in the room. Role play will often be concerning the day to day life and moments of the client, as they play out the real situations of their lives.

Phase four is Culminating Enactment. This moves the therapy from the present-day issues that were being explored previously to the more core issues of the self. This phase uses psychodramatic processes as a tool towards doing a psychodrama-like scene.

Phase five is Dramatic Ritual. This is a way to create closure as the therapy ends and help the client bring their learning back to the outside world.

Emunah's use of improvisation is integral to her approach. While discussing the development of her technique and how she came to create her approach, Emunah writes, "Most of the "borrowed" techniques are those of Viola Spolin" (p. 139).

Emunah continues to list the techniques that one could use in session. and one can see Spolin's influence everywhere. Dozens of the exercises are direct imports of Spolin's games. There is a large section of mirroring games that are all Spolin games and one can see Spolin's influence throughout the entire list of techniques. Some like the mirroring exercises, "dubbing," and "space substances" are direct pulls from Spolin while others such as "calling out emotions" are combinations and slight varieties of other Spolin games. For example, "calling out emotions" combines three exercises of Spolin found in *Improvisation for the Theater*: "Changing Emotion" (p. 223), "Changing Intensity of Inner Action" (p. 224), and "Jump Emotion" (p. 225). Emunah mentions that exercises have been "explored, and in many cases modified and adapted" (p. 139). Examples of this adaptation can be seen throughout many of the techniques. For example, in the technique of "Silent Scream," Emunah notes that while Spolin used this to help players physicalize emotions, she instead uses it to facilitate the expression of rage in the safety of silence before possibly adding sound. Another example of this is when Emunah describes Spolin's gibberish games but presents it in a way that shows the powerful containment and distancing that gibberish can provide when expressing an emotion like anger.

Emunah's exploration of techniques often follow this method of describing Spolin's work and then explaining the way in which she uses it, *therapeutically*. This makes Emunah's book an

incredible resource for any drama therapist that has felt the power of Spolin's work and is looking for a way to bridge the divide between her work and drama therapy.

Emunah writes about a method she uses for emotional containment and distancing, and the tool she uses is clearly inspired by Spolin. Emunah describes herself in a session:

> I will shout Freeze! In the middle of the action at which point I will incorporate a distancing device, such as: 1) directing the client/actors to reverse roles (thereby lessening their identification with their character, and facilitating deeper understanding of the other character); 2) asking the client/actors, or the clients watching the scene, to think about what has taken place and decide what should follow (thereby fostering reflectivity and the capacity to perceive choices and options); 3) asking the client/actors to speak about their characters, in the style of a television interview show (promoting objective analysis of the characters). (p. 9)

This is a great example of Emunah taking Spolin's games almost fully as they were played in Spolin's workshops and, through the transfer into the drama therapy session, transformed into a therapeutic intervention.

Emunah sees these games as a way of distancing as well as containing. In this way the game links to Landy (1994) as well, as he sees much importance in distancing to allow the client to safely explore issues that might otherwise flood the client, emotionally.

Emunah's use of Spolin's games is incredibly extensive. It is clear that Emunah sees Spolin as a huge resource to accomplish the goals of drama therapy. While Spolin shows up most in the early phases of Emunah's five stages, she does at times use Spolin again later in the process. Spolin is such an integral part of Emunah's approach, and as Emunah has become an

enormous influence on the field of drama therapy, we once again see Spolin having an effect on the field through her work.

Interestingly, the two drama therapy theorists, already mentioned above, jointly wrote an article where they mention Spolin's influence on their sessions.

Emunah & Johnson (1983) discuss the importance of improvisation to their theatre making in their study on the impact of theatrical performance on the self-images of psychiatric patients. They mention that at the start group cohesion is helped by improvisation, which Spolin (1999) discusses as a main result of improvisational activities. They also mention that the theatre making is written through improvisation. They write: "Generally, inpatients and many ex-patients prefer, and perhaps require, the direct link to the outside provided by an improvisationally-based script concerning their personal lives" (p. 239). This idea of using improvisation as a means to write a script for later performance is a facet of Spolin and especially of the Second City Theatre that her son founded upon her ideas.

While in more recent years there has been a split about whether improvisation needs to be developed into a script or can be performed as it is, Emunah & Johnson's use closely mirrors the original intention that Spolin had in mind when developing her ideas into a theatre.

Spolin and Daniel Wiener

Spolin's work might be most clearly seen in the work of Daniel Wiener and his approach to drama therapy called Rehearsals for Growth. In this approach Wiener will pause the therapy session and ask his clients to move to another part of the room in order to play an improvisational theatre game. Once the game is done the clients will return to the therapy session with the new information gleaned from the improvisational game. By bringing Spolin's games

into the therapy room without making any real changes, Wiener appears to be the drama therapist with the most belief in the direct help afforded by the Spolin improvisation game.

Wiener (1999) notes three tasks for successful relationship therapy that can be found in Spolin's improvisation theories. These three are: "(a) changing dysfunctional yet stable transactional patterns; (b) broadening the range of displayed identities that clients present to significant others; and (c) altering overly negative affective interpersonal climates" (p. 166). Wiener also mentions four other areas that can be helped by improvisation games in therapy. These are: the encouragement of novelty and playfulness, the experience of spontaneity and risk taking, the ability to build interpersonal trust, and the ability to co-create new realities. While Wiener does not provide a list of improv exercises one could use in a session, he does provide two case examples. In each of these examples a classic improv game is transported into the therapy session and fully played before what comes up in the game is explored in a more talk-therapy manner.

Wiener (1997) described how he came to the creation of his therapeutic process that he calls Rehearsals for Growth. Wiener noticed that competent stage improvisation shared characteristics with skills that he was trying to foster through his therapy. He noted that attentiveness to others, flexibility, accepting direction, supporting teammates, and many others, were skills that could help his clients in their social roles. Wiener continues to discuss how the marked off area of play allows his clients to play freely without the risks of real-life consequences. Wiener illustrates five cases within his marriage and family therapy practice where the use of Spolin's improvised theatre exercises helped his clients gain an understanding and grow within their relationship.

Wiener (1997) notes his own experience with improvised theatre and how it helped him as a therapist. He continues to elucidate a few improvised theatre skills, as well as improvised theatre team dynamics, and the effect they had on whether a performance was seen to be successful. Wiener makes the connection to his therapy sessions with clients and the positive effects that he saw when he introduced improvised theatre exercises. He presents the case study of a session where he used an improvised theatre game to a successful conclusion.

Wiener (1999) noticed that one way of assessing adequate improvised theatre performance was to observe the role functions present in their performance. Wiener posits that clients' difficulty in life may be similarly linked to poor performance and role function. This links very well to Landy (1994) and his role method in drama therapy where health is seen as the ability to fluidly move through roles and play each with creativity and spontaneity. It is also linked to Goffman (1959) and his idea that humans are always on a stage and performing for those around them.

Rehearsals for Growth has blossomed as more studies have been done with different populations, showing the ability for improvised theatre exercises to help with various populations. Wiener (1999) studied the effect of theatre games within relationship therapy, as well as providing a process for introducing the exercises into the therapy. Ramseur and Wiener (2003) studied the effects of Rehearsals for Growth with substance abuse groups. This study specifies several specific improvisational theatre games, how they are played and the outcomes within the group after playing the games.

Wiener (2012) continued to show how improvisational theatre can not only be used in therapy as a means to growth, but can also be used as an assessment tool in couples therapy. Wiener describes a few ways that he has found to use improvisation to assess his clients and

garner information that can help him gain insight into the best use of drama therapy interventions. Wiener describes his own journey in developing an assessment tool and the stages in which his work has gone. Wiener notes that oftentimes the client's views on their own cooperation and attentiveness was often largely discrepant from the way they performed in the room. The improvisations were able to give the therapist more information about the couple as well as provide the client with a new perspective on the relationship. Wiener also notes that the therapist can watch for patterns that show up in the improvisational play, as those patterns are greatly influenced by the relationship of the two players outside of the performance context. Wiener next developed seven concepts of good improvisation that can be seen in the improvisations in the therapy room that provided him a lens to make sense of the relationship and can be scored on a scoring sheet. These seven are clear boundaries, balanced contribution, character acceptance, wide expressive range, strong character, positive outcome, and spontaneous idea development. Wiener later simplified the scoring system, as the original system was difficult to score. Wiener later posits that an assessment tool can be created out of the nine improvisation games most used in clinical settings. Wiener lists these games and several of them are directly from Spolin . Wiener has created and continues to create many possible ways in which to assess the relationship of couples using improvisation.

Snow (in Johnson Pendzik & Snow, 2012) writes that Paul McReynolds could be considered a forerunner to Wiener's work with improvisation as an assessment tool. They describe the assessment tool as a role play performance that would often begin as a scripted scene and which would switch to improvisation at some point. While this is an instance of using improvisation in assessment, they write, "…this sounds a great deal like Moreno's original

Spontaneity Test" (p. 14). While this work is both similar to Moreno and to Wiener, it was only Wiener's assessment tool that directly used the games created by Spolin.

Spolin and Some Others

Johnson, Emunah, and Wiener are the three theorists with the clearest link connecting Spolin and the theories of the Drama Therapy field, but when one looks, Spolin can be found to fit with other Drama Therapy theorists as well. As Spolin focused on releasing the spontaneity that lies latent in the player, she has been a great resource and a helpful guide for Drama Therapy which puts a very large importance on spontaneity as well. Many theories and theorists are able to exist and present their approaches without reference to Spolin; it is also possible to add Spolin's ideas and techniques to these approaches. For example, Landy's (1994) idea of Aesthetic Distancing, creating a distance where the client can feel the emotion through a fictional character, but not so fully that the emotion floods. While it is not necessary in any way to rely on Spolin to do this, Aesthetic distancing can be accomplished using the Spolin games as described earlier or by using the general idea of playing a fictional character while still needing to be in touch with the authentic self to provide the missing dialogue of the scene.

Stephen Snow, the co-founder of the Drama Therapy Masters Program at Concordia University, utilized Spolin extensively in his development of the course "Improvisation and Drama Therapy Studio". Snow (2000) writes that "Improvisation is the essential medium of drama therapy; most drama therapy methods employ some kind of improvisational role-playing" (p. 88). In the section on "The Importance of Improvisation to Drama Therapy" in Gold (2000), he writes: "…improvisational role-playing is the sine qua non of drama therapy" (p. 90). He continues to write "...improvisation is the very lifeblood of drama therapy" (p.91). He later notes that improvisation is both a tool that the future drama therapist can use in their practice as well as

a way to enhance the student's personal development. The fact Stephen Snow developed a course that specifically focuses on the use of improvisation in drama therapy, and the utilization of Spolin within that course, show the importance of improvisation in Snow's philosophy of drama therapy. This course and outlook influence the future generations of drama therapists that pursue their masters of drama therapy at Concordia University.

Spolin (1981) in the book, *Drama In Therapy Volume Two*, writes of her work in ways that oftentimes mirrors techniques in drama therapy. Spolin writes "Theater games are a safe harbor and a simple way to bring players to this state of crisis or imbalance" (p. 216). Spolin was looking to find a space that was safer than the outside real world where a player could explore feelings in a safe environment. This is similar to creating a safe container in which to do the work, which is found often in drama therapy sessions.

Johnston (2009) describes something he sees in Spolin's games that he feels helps with growth. He writes that through the improvisations ability to restage the familiar scenes and acts of real life, the player is able to test imagined alternative selves and realities. In this way the player can develop and practice different selves and roles. This idea shows that it would be possible to fit Spolin's improvisations to help with the theory of role repertoire found in Landy (1994), where he theorized that health is having a large role repertoire where one does not get stuck playing only one role. Johnston also provides a justification towards using improvisation as a tool for assessment. He writes that a player's reaction might be in the playspace and a made-up response, but in reality, it is impossible for the player to have a reaction that does not come from the self and hold a truth about the reaction of the self in that moment. Due to the brain not being able to fully see the imagined scene as a complete fabrication, the brain will still react in a truthful way, though the mind may embellish or stage it in a certain way for the sake of the

improv.

While one does not necessarily need to come to Spolin for these techniques, it is still possible to use her work in this capacity. This is true of many drama therapy ideas and it lies to the field to see the further utility in using Spolin's games.

Chapter 7. Improvisation in the Research

A brief review at some of the research and journal articles being produced in the field of drama therapy show that Spolin and her ideas have been used extensively and continue to be used at the current time.

Barish, Pfeffer, and Sheesley (2016) discuss the potential of comedic improv therapy for a population with social anxiety disorder. The theory differs from other studies in the fact that it identifies the comedic element of improvisational theatre as a crucial tool in the therapy. The study is based on an existing clinical program at the Second City theatre in Chicago using improvised theater for social anxiety disorder. The authors note that through the use of specific improvised theatre exercises, the clients can learn group cohesion, play, exposure, as well as humor. The authors write that the comedy is a crucial element in the therapy as it allows the participants to positively deal with the improvisation and any fears that may be involved. They also note that laughter put the brain in the best position to fully embrace the social learning that occurs. This idea of laughter and positive thinking would work well with Ringstrom (see above) and his theory about a posi-traum where a positive moment of joy can be the catalyst for meaningful change.

Krueger, Murphy & Bink (2019) created a study to see the effect of improvisational games for clients with depression and anxiety. In the study they devised a series of workshops where the clients partook in improvisational theatre training based on the games of Spolin. The results of the study showed positive effects on the levels of anxiety, self-esteem, and depression. One idea of why this positive result occurred, other than the inherent therapeutic nature of the games, was seen to be the possibility of behavioral activation as it focuses on the growth of positive pleasant activities. This behavioral activation allows for operant conditioning to

reinforce these behaviors. Once again this is similar to Ringstrom's posi-traum, showing that a joyful experience can be lasting and meaningful.

Pitruzella (2002) while researching the idea of transformative events and its importance in drama therapy, provides a brief description of how at a difficult moment in a session he turned to Spolin's games to help his client. He saw in a session the need to activate bodily energy and decided the best way to get there was through play. He describes the Spolin exercise called Space Substance and reports on the positive progressions that occurred for the rest of the therapy due to the ability to jump into a Spolin game.

Tomasulo & Szucs (2015) discuss a new model for drama therapy with clients with intellectual disabilities. The model, called ACT, is a modification of Interactive-Behavioral Therapy to include a larger drama therapy perspective. In the first stage of ACT, the drama therapists use modified Improvisation games to foster cognitive networking. They write "ACT uses modified interactive theatre games designed to enhance focus on the surroundings, self, and other group members using all senses–to listen, reflect, pay attention, establish trust and safety, and be open to giving and receiving" (p. 108). They note their debt to the work of Spolin when discussing their use of modified improvisational theatre exercises in order to reach cognitive networking.

Bernstein (1985) writes about using Spolin's exercises in a classroom involving children with educational handicaps. Bernstein describes why the approach of Spolin is well suited for work such as this. Bernstein describes that the exercises create a sense of community:

> The action of individual players in creating a common dramatic experience leads to a sense of harmony and mutuality. All players are necessary for the event and all participate in the joy of its creation. Spolin work is a group method in which the process

> of becoming involved leads to healing a player's sense of isolation and releasing the player's creativity. (p. 219)

He notes that through the exercises the children were able to foster individual and group development, and the children's focus changed from unfocused and destructive action to involvement with enjoyment and creativity. Bernstein uses specific observations of actions in his classroom throughout the ten-week process to show the positive growth that the children attained throughout the sessions. Bernstein mentions the children's trajectory of becoming involved, choosing to participate, agreeing to rules, initiating and reflecting on their actions, the use and manipulation of space, and the growth of the children's relationship with their usually authoritarian teachers within the play space. Bernstein credits this to Spolin's exercise having the ability to increase involvement and grow a sense of self while interacting socially.

Tselikas (2009) describes Spolin's idea that concentrating on the subject matter and the tasks in the improvisation exercises, instead of concentrating on the dynamics of the relationship of those playing the game, will allow a stronger focus to be put on the play and allow the relationships to transform and grow through the play. Tselikas notes that this was in opposition to group dynamics principles in that groups would generally concentrate on the relationships with the idea that once the relationship tensions have been cleared, the group will be able to easily accomplish the tasks and that "…it is through concentrating on the task that the space is created within which the 'social' can be assembled" (p. 21).

There continues to be an enormous interest in improvisational theatre and Spolin's work. This interest can be seen by the growth in improvisational theatre worldwide as well as the continued use of improvisation and Spolin's games within the world of drama therapy.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

At the start of this journey I knew from my own experience the powerfully healing nature of Viola Spolin's improvisation games. I had an in-depth experiential education in how the games had changed my own life and had seen hundreds of improv students pass through the same curriculum and emerge on the other end more able to deal with the challenges of the world in a healthy manner. Knowing how Spolin had influenced my own understanding of theatre and health, I had come to this research with the desire to know if she had also influenced the thoughts and approaches of those drama therapists that had come before me. Through discussions with my colleagues in the world of drama therapy, I came to realize that my experience was shared amongst many others. Many of us first found drama therapy in the experiential realm and only later moved on to study the theoretical underpinnings of that felt experience. Many shared the thrill of discovery when they felt this experiential growth in themselves and were under the impression that they were discovering something brand new. The realization that there were many who came before us and a large history of theories and writings, becomes a huge comfort. The education of the theories and history of the drama therapy provided an important framework and foundational support for the work that is currently being done in the field. To gain this framework, I searched for the history and theories that most fit into my lived experience of this healing power in the theatre games of Viola Spolin. While there was definitely mention of Spolin and her work, I was surprised that there was no systematic exploration of Spolin's work and the influence that it had on the current field of drama therapy. I hope that my research begins to clarify that influence. My research shows that Spolin most likely did not see her work as therapy, though she was well aware that her work was therapeutic in nature. Although there is no concrete proof in any primary sources, the examination of the secondary sources and the shared

geographic history shows that there is an extremely high likelihood that Spolin had knowledge, and was influenced by, the work of Jacob Levy Moreno. Spolin in turn influenced the work of many pillars of the drama therapy field directly. Spolin and her games can be found in a few of the most important original drama therapy approaches and her influence is felt through these theorists. Current drama therapy practitioners and researchers have been very likely to name Spolin when referencing their work and Spolin's influence seems to still be growing within the drama therapy field. The concepts that she helped develop can also be seen in the continued research that is being done in the field of drama therapy as many studies have recently been published about the use of Spolin games in therapy.

Spolin was hesitant to call her games 'therapy' but I hope that my research can be a start for the drama therapy community in acknowledging the large influence she has had on the field and claim her legacy as an important forerunner to the field. There is much more work to be done to place Spolin in the correct position within the framework of drama therapy history and current practices. I hope this research paper pushes others to continue searching and working to completely clarify the connection between Viola Spolin and the field of drama therapy.

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