

About Playback Theatre¹

Playback Theatre is created through a unique collaboration between performers and audience. Someone tells a story or moment from their life, chooses actors to play the different roles, then watches as their story is immediately recreated and given artistic shape and coherence.

Playback Theatre creates a ritual space where any story - however ordinary, extraordinary, hidden or difficult - might be told, and immediately made into theatre. And where each person's uniqueness is honoured and affirmed while at the same time building and strengthening our connections to each other as a community of people.

The original Playback Theatre Company came together in 1975, with Jonathan Fox as its director. This was in the mid-Hudson valley of upstate New York and part of the experimental theatre explorations of the 1970s - looking for ways of reaching out to its audience, bringing theatre closer to everyday reality, and breaking away from the tradition of scripted theatre. Since then Playback Theatre has spread across the world with companies and practitioners in over 30 countries. It thrives in a variety of settings, existing as community theatre gatherings as well as a professional service to both the business and social sector.

Influences

- Community ritual & theatre: Jonathan Fox had lived in Nepal and experienced these deeply embedded into the rhythms of everyday life.
- Oral tradition of storytelling: where people gather together to hear and share the old stories - the world of myths and legends and folktales.
- Psychodrama: while there are differences in form and practice, there are many shared values in Playback Theatre and psychodrama. For example:
 - spontaneity and the release of creative energy
 - inclusiveness - every individual has a place in the collective.

Artistic additions

Each company may have some additional features, for example: a cloth 'tree' at the upstage right corner - a selection of coloured cloth draped over a rail or ladder which can be used in the action. Or upstage there may be a simple curtain on a rail to create a hidden area for the actors to use in the action. These are optional extras.

Rhythm of a performance

There is no script, but there is a rhythm and sequence to a Playback Theatre performance. The Conductor is the host and facilitator of the process. After a period of introductions and warming up, someone will volunteer to tell a story. It could be a short moment, or about a longer event. They may be past, present or future stories. They could be about a very special time or about something that happens everyday. In the course of a performance 3, 4 or 5, maybe more, people will come forward to tell a story in this way. Towards the end of a performance, the conductor may invite reflections on the process, and the team will create some sort of closure appropriate for the event.

¹ Text from <http://www.playbackcentre.org>

Threads of Meaning

Sometimes a Playback performance may begin with an explicit theme, and the stories are offered following this thread. Sometimes there is no theme to begin with, and the underlying concerns and interests of the community will reveal themselves through the deeper patterning of the stories. This is not always obvious, and a skilful conductor may be able to bring this to consciousness at the end of the performance.

Sequence of story

The heart of the playback performance is in the sharing of stories. When someone volunteers to tell, this person, called the Teller, will cross from the audience area to the Teller's chair. The story is told from this place with the support of the Conductor.

- During the interview, the Teller chooses actors to play roles in the story. As the actors are chosen, they stand. When the story is told, the Conductor will say 'Lets watch'.
- The performers take this as their cue to set up for the beginning of the enactment. There may be music to set an atmosphere and mood, the actors may use their boxes or chairs to define the space.
- During the enactment, the actors and musician will spontaneously improvise a re-enactment of the story, and this may happen in different artistic forms, aiming to present and capture the essence and heart of the story. At the end of the enactment, the actors look to the Teller as an act of acknowledgement.
- Then there is a closure with the Teller - an opportunity to say something more if they feel moved to. Sometimes nothing more need be said or perhaps a few words, sometimes the Teller is offered a chance for a correction or a transformation of the scene. And the actors will replay it accordingly. The conductor thanks the Teller who returns to their seat. And then another person is invited to tell the next story, and so on.

The simple rules of this sequence form part of the ritual that is an essential aspect of Playback Theatre.

Ritual

The ritualistic aspect of Playback Theatre provides an important container for the whole experience. The ritual creates a framework, a definition for the process, within which the unpredictable and the miraculous can manifest. When the ritual is held well by the conductor and the performers, there is a subconscious sense of safety amongst the audience. And in this atmosphere, the most profound as well as the most mundane of personal stories will feel welcomed and honoured.

Art

Whether performed as a naturalistic scene, or through abstract movement or sound, or as a dance, or with puppets and song (or a combination of these forms), when the heart of the story is captured with a high level of artistry, there can be profound impact and another level of transformation and healing. When this is witnessed as a spontaneous ensemble creation, it offers a deeper experience of our humanity and collective potential.

Social Interaction

Alongside the fundamental principles of Ritual and Art, Playback Theatre gives attention to social interaction. The ritual and artistic response is only meaningful when there is a good awareness of the whole group experience. This theatre form is in direct service to healing relationship, communication and understanding between people. This is an underlying value, so the conductor interacts directly with the audience with respect and human warmth, and is sensitive to the larger social context of the Playback event. By listening to personal stories we feel and weave the deeper web of our story as a community of people and thus tap into the collective and universal experience. Social change and transformation begins here, as we make space for the stories of the community, through individual voices, and are affected by them.

The Playback Actor

Authenticity in the spontaneous moment underlies Playback Theatre practice. The notion of the 'citizen actor' is very much part of the Playback world - that anyone has the natural capacity to perform Playback Theatre in a satisfying way. Playback Theatre challenges the actors to listen, allow intuition and inspiration to arise, trust and support each other, and to call upon their innate personal wisdom and experience. So in Playback Theatre training, in addition to theatre skills, there is a need to develop greater personal awareness, and self-understanding. Playback performers come from many different backgrounds - social workers, administrators, educators. Some are professional actors, many are creative artists, trainers and therapists.

The Playback Company

The norm is for a group to practice together, perhaps one evening a week, for a period of time, before performing openly. Many groups make a commitment to performing regularly, monthly or bimonthly, for their community in a public venue. When a group becomes more skilful, they will offer performances for special commissions. It is an interesting phenomenon that members of Playback companies tend to stay in a company for many years often for little or no remuneration for their time or service. Somehow the values and work of Playback Theatre - the orientation of theatre in direct service to the community - gives more than sufficient reward to the members of a company. And the investment of shared experience over a period of time creates an artistry that can be extraordinary.

The diversity of contexts and audiences

The flexibility of the Playback form permits a high degree of sensitivity to the needs of specific groups. Here are a few examples.

1. Social change & action: A group in the Northern Territories of Australia performed to Aboriginal communities as part of a programme to enhance self-esteem and recovery from substance abuse. Playback has been used in hearing from both sides on the Palestinian/Israeli issue. In Argentina, playback helped reconstruct collective memory of their social/political history.
2. Corporate contexts: An audience of Swiss engineers and accountants shared stories through Playback Theatre about organisational re-structuring; an audience of Post Office workers in Washington DC were facing redundancy.

3. In education: In Alaska, schoolchildren used Playback Theatre to deal with their grief over the death of a fellow student. Hong Kong teenagers perform playback as part of their community service programme.
4. In therapy: Playback Theatre is also used as an additional tool for psychotherapists in their group work. In Chicago, a group of schizophrenics, outpatients at a psychiatric unit, met regularly to do Playback Theatre for each other, and told stories of coping with everyday life.
5. Community events: In Sydney, Playback Theatre was part of a wedding celebration. In London, it was performed at a Remembrance Evening. In Japan, a Playback group performed for mentally handicapped people and their friends and family every month.
6. Public performances: Playback Theatre is performed to the general public at theatres and art centres all over the world. It has been said that Playback is a theatre of neighbours. You may have come into the theatre as a stranger, but almost certainly by the end of the evening, you will feel a sense of aliveness and ease in talking to the people around you.

Grounding the Transpersonal

You could say that Playback Theatre is a form of healing, even sacred, theatre which creates an opportunity for the divine to enter in to an experience shared by a gathering of people. However one conceives this, it is nevertheless grounded in everyday life and stories, where the spontaneous enactment of personal experience builds connection between people by honouring the dignity, drama and universality of their stories.

Books on Playback Theatre

Many articles and theses have now been written about Playback Theatre. Three seminal books are available:

7. IMPROVISING REAL LIFE: Personal Story in Playback Theatre by Jo Salas 1993
8. ACTS OF SERVICE: Spontaneity, Commitment Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre by Jonathan Fox 1986
9. GATHERING VOICES: Essays on Playback Theatre ed. by Jonathan Fox & Heinrich Dauber 1999

Websites on Playback Theatre

- <http://www.playbacknet.org>
- <http://www.playbackcentre.org>
- <http://www.playbacktheater-hannover.de>