



# Gathering Voices Essays on Playback Theatre

*Practical Aspects from the Life of a  
Playback Theatre Ensemble  
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## Practical Aspects from the Life of a Playback Theatre Ensemble

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In this article we will report on selected aspects of the four-year development of our playback theatre ensemble, from its founding in September 1993 until the time of the Symposium at Kassel University in May 1997.

In the first part, we introduce the formation of the *Spiegelbühne Frankfurt Playback Theatre* and explain some of our conceptual ideas preceding this foundation. In the second part, a retrospective by the founding leaders, we will summarize important moments in the life of the ensemble and further describe phases in the group's development process. In addition, we will show how group life was influenced both by various workshops and by external events from members' personal lives and society on the whole.

The *Spiegelbühne Frankfurt Playback Theatre* has existed since the beginning of September 1993. We began with seven members (four women and three men), including two married couples (the two leaders and two group members). An additional man came to the second rehearsal, and after two months of rehearsing, another woman joined us.

Of these nine members, seven had had various amounts of previous experience with playback theatre (PT)—either as participants at workshops or as members of PT groups. In January of 1995, in the middle of our second year, we took on two additional members (one woman and one man). They had become familiar with the work of the ensemble by attending performances and brought some of their own previous experience from earlier PT workshops.

We ourselves began our PT work as founding leaders following a training program with Jonathan Fox in 1988, and since then have both continually worked as group members and as conductors with a number of groups. In addition, we were able to augment our experience by participating in various PT workshops and international

conferences. In the summer of 1994, we participated in a multi-week-long seminar for leaders at the School of Playback Theatre at Vassar College, New York (founded in 1993), and were among the first graduates. Our joint work was enriched by other previous experience: particularly psychodrama (since 1983 and 1978 respectively) and theatre work (since 1980 and 1976—including student theatre, improvisation, mask work with L. Sheleen, and work with the methods of A. Boal).

Members of the *Spiegelbühne* live for the most part within Frankfurt and its surroundings; a few travel up to eighty kilometers. Ten of our members are German citizens; one is French. We are all “immigrants“ to Frankfurt, in the sense that none of us was born and raised in the city or is a native of Frankfurt. Instead six of us come from Hesse, one from Kurpfalz, one from the Rheinland, two from Westphalia, one from upper Frankonia and one from Paris. The sum of the group is representative of a cross-section of the population that has moved to Frankfurt. All of us have lived for various lengths of time at our current residence. However, all have lived for a longer period in stable social contexts, partially alone and/or with a partner and/or child in an apartment or a house. All are or have been married, some remarried. Half of us have at least one child.

All eleven members belong to the middle-class, and work in educational, social or therapeutic professions (adult education, school, university, social work, psychotherapy). With one exception, all of us are involved in psychodrama. At the time of the Symposium at Kassel University in May of 1997, the members were between 36 and 54 years of age (average 45.8). During our time together, themes and stories have arisen from our respective phases of life and existential events in our lives, both professionally and in partnerships. These themes flowed into our rehearsals and performances and included “unemployment,” “illness” and/or “death of family members,” “loss of parents” and “growing older.”

During these four years of unchanged membership, we have experienced both good times as well as difficult phases with one another. Together we have tried to find and maintain the balance between private life and group life, rehearsals and performances, continuing training sessions and external supervision, and between individual and ensemble interests.

With our background in psychodrama and sociometry, and experience with group

dynamics as well as PT, we had already worked out a certain conceptual framework before establishing the ensemble.

In founding the PT ensemble, we considered the following criteria when talking to specific people or being approached by interested candidates:

Familiarity and/or recommendation. In order to extend a previous basis for relationship, previous acquaintance and/or recommendations from trusted members of the PT movement was required for an interview.

Fellow feeling. Since many private and sometimes intimate themes are touched upon and handled in our work, a mutual compatibility was a necessary basis on which we could easily build the necessary trust for PT work.

Self-experience. In PT work, emotionally deep themes in the players' and audience members' personal stories are often dealt with; and during rehearsals and performances players are often given many and very different roles one after the other. This requires a certain flexibility in taking on roles and sometimes the ability to either appropriately integrate the activated internal processes and reactions, or to postpone these until after the performance. The future members of our group, therefore, should already know their most important personal issues in order to be able to encounter deep emotional processes in themselves and others. In addition, they should be in the position to work constructively within a group since improvising together represents a critical aspect of PT. Individual contributions should fit adequately into the group as a whole, rather than dominate it. In our opinion, to have previous experience in long-term, intensive groups is an important prerequisite for an actor in a stable performance-oriented PT group and enables further development of the required skills. Through our own connections to the psychodrama network, almost all the members of the formed group had similar experience with psychodrama.

Willingness to commit time. From the beginning, the ensemble met once a week for multiple hours of rehearsing. Members were expected to spend an entire evening a week, including travel time, at least from 7 p.m. onwards. This meant taking on this evening appointment to the exclusion of other private and professional activities. Particularly for the freelance workers, this sometimes required reorganizing their schedules.

Willingness to perform in public. An important requirement for joining the ensemble was the willingness to take part in public playback theatre performances—that is, the willingness to risk the adventure of performance in front of an unknown audience, and to trust both the group's and one's own PT skills.

Personal motivation. The interested players' motivation to be involved in playback was, among other things, based on the need to belong to a group, to play and perform, to do something for others and for oneself, and to develop oneself.

These criteria were in part discussed one-on-one, so that the decision to take on a member in all cases was a mutual decision. This decision was always made at first for a 3-month try-out period or until the end of 1993. The decision for each other as members developed during the try-out period was celebrated together in December 1993. Out of this developed the end-of-the-year ritual of having a meal together. Later we had special rituals to welcome new members.

As leaders we set our weekly rehearsals for Thursday, for three hours of training, in the group room of a psychotherapy practice.

The rehearsal room remained the same for about 4 years, and became a sort of home base and an important stabilizing factor for the group. The atmosphere in the rooms was almost private—there was a kitchen, which could be used for the framing activities, such as conversations at the beginning, during breaks, and for celebrations. The group room had a parquet floor and due to its small size a kind of living room atmosphere. Since the first performances took place here, there was an automatic limit to the number of audience members (at most twenty-five to thirty).

In the first few months we [Daniel & Marlies] alternated in the conducting. Since markedly different styles of conducting became apparent, we later conducted for time periods leading up to a coming performance.

From the beginning we pursued the idea that members should increasingly practice and take over the role of conductor. Over time, it became clear that this process required special preparation and a much longer time frame than we had originally presumed.

The group should above all be fun, utilize participants' potentials, and make growth possible, an attitude influenced by our own group-experience, particularly from

psychodrama, group dynamics, and theatre work with the Boal method.

Therefore, our concentration lay more in developing individually and as a group and less in the direction of classical forms of theatre.

Performances were an integral part of the group. However, they were not supposed to be an exclusive guideline for the work. Specific preparations were only made at rehearsals directly preceding a performance.

In the back of our minds was the idea of utilizing the connecting function of PT to perform regularly for people in our city and/or in our individual districts—for instance, to support discussions about current developments in the city—thus creating a set place for PT in the public mind.

At first, as leaders, we wanted to handle the possibilities for performances that would be appropriate for our ensemble's stage of development and the PT form of theatre. Later, members should also take on this role and responsibility—for example, by making contacts, preparing contracts, and carrying out other organizational preparations, as well as conducting performances. Every offer and/or self-organized performance would be discussed and decided by the group, as well as scheduled together.

## The Early Years

During the first three months—in the simultaneous phases of foundation and try-out period until the end of 1993—it was above all important that everyone could find their own place in the group and work out a sustainable basis for the group as a whole. In the basic training sessions, the individual forms of expression and/or different possibilities for expression became apparent. In regard to the approaching performances, it was necessary to act with one another, and tune the individual acting impulses to fit the situation and the common formation, and under certain circumstances even to withdraw oneself.

By practicing the PT forms, improvising individually as well as together, sharing, and mutual feedback, a good foundation was created over time, a foundation which further developed skills of cooperation between players and the ability to perceive the possibilities for the events on stage.

At this stage, all the members proved somewhat ambivalent about feedback. On the one hand, they wanted to receive clear feedback on the quality of their individual acting, but on the other, they were awkward or shy, uncertain and insecure about this feedback.

In later rehearsals and performances, we would time and again occupy ourselves with the issue of how to find constructive forms of feedback and how to develop these forms and ritualize them.

After the try-out period, a great willingness existed to continue work in the given constellation. Already in these first 12 rehearsals developments could be recognized: increasingly aesthetic and intense scenes were achieved on stage.

However, in the agreement between everyone present, there was no discussion about time frames. At this early date in building the group, there were no thoughts of leaving or being asked to leave—and no one touched on the subject.

Despite the amount of energy required, everyone showed an unusual commitment to the group and to this form of theatre. In the first year, there were rarely absences; everyone was at almost every rehearsal and performance. Certainly, a factor was that each member was well aware of how she spent her free time and had clearly chosen playback theatre.

At the beginning of the try-out period (September 1993), we had already received a preliminary request for a performance at a conference for psychotherapists in February 1994. At the end of the try-out period (December 1993) we discussed this request together and decided to accept it. In addition, we decided to practice beforehand (January 1994) with a performance for family and friends, therefore ensuring a warm reception from our first audience. To celebrate the end of the try-out period and the year, the leaders prepared a meal for the group. A kind of tradition grew out of this event, whereby in the following years both the meal and the celebration would be increasingly created together.

At the beginning of the next year (1994), three performances and a training workshop followed quickly one after another creating an intense period for the group:

January '94: the first performance. The first performance was originally considered a

practice run for the February commission. It took place in our rehearsal space in the psychotherapy practice. Each group member could invite one or two audience members out of their private social circle, so that we played before an audience guaranteed to be receptive and could count on open feedback. Therefore, the group had a certain amount of security for their first performance. Altogether, fourteen people attended who were impressed and even enthusiastic about our show. Most would return to our performances time and again.

February '94: the second performance. This performance took place within the context of a psychotherapy conference about "Teaching Psychotherapy." The head of the psychodrama department, who had known us for a long time from psychodrama circles, invited us. The performance took place mid-way through the conference and served as a way for the conference participants to take stock of their issues, impressions, and feelings.

This performance was a challenge for us because the audience was obviously tired and in the mood for easily consumed evening entertainment. At first they were reserved, expressed themselves indirectly, and/or told symbolic stories. Thereafter, attractive and in part uplifting images and scenes developed that were received in an increasingly warm and relaxed atmosphere.

March '94: the third performance. The third performance grew out of a connection to a film director, who had attended the first performance and who had known one of the leaders for years. In the framework of a TV-film project for "Radio Hessen" about various forms of violence among youth, we performed for a group of young female patients from the Frankfurt Center for Eating Disorders. The girls told about their experiences with eating disorders. Due to the technical requirements of filming, the process was occasionally interrupted, but the PT work was, nevertheless, felt to be very intense by all involved, including the film crew.

In the same month (March '94), almost all the members of the *Spiegelbühne* (eight of nine) took part in a training workshop with René Marineau (from Montréal, Canada), which dealt with therapeutic aspects of PT. Parallels became clear on the group level between this training and the second and third performances (which took place in therapeutic contexts). In addition to the everyday topics which had previously dominated, more and more biographical themes arose, which deepened



the process and led to closer relationships within the group.

At around this time, external events affected the group. Two members were attacked and robbed while on vacation in Africa; another member of the *Spiegelbühne* became unemployed. Following these events, stories came up during rehearsals about violent threats and dealing with them, and about loss of security and the wish for support and protection.

Shortly thereafter, in May 1994, a workshop with Jonathan Fox was held in which again eight members of the *Spiegelbühne* participated as their second further training. With the title, "Communication and Social Change," the workshop focused on social issues and conflicts, so that this external stimulus refocused our attention on the themes that had arisen in our group.

The impetus gained from such external training courses was an important enrichment for our group work, and since then we have tried to organize training sessions and workshops regularly in Frankfurt for the members of the *Spiegelbühne* and for members of playback outside of our ensemble.

An additional external event became an influential factor in our work that followed. As the only PT performing group in the city at that time, we were asked to be part of a German Christian-Jewish project in the memorial year of 1995 on the theme of "Holocaust and Reconciliation." At first we were interested. But since the project was still in the planning phase and the request to perform was yet unclear, we could not make any definite commitment to participate.

### The First Difficulties

Meanwhile, an underlying conflict between two members surfaced. We attempted, at least provisionally, to clarify the issue in an adapted form of PT—the partners in conflict took their seats to the right and left of the conductor and traded off telling how they understood the situation and the aspects of the conflict that they found important. The rest of the group portrayed the stories.

During the rehearsals that followed, additional scenes with taboo themes (aggression, sex, death) were touched upon. These decreased, but would become relevant repeatedly over the next years. In this context, the questions arose: how

could we represent these taboo subjects adequately on stage, and how could a misrepresentation be avoided?

During this time, in which we were occupied with many difficult situations and group issues, no performances were held. We needed time and space for the internal processes and individual themes. We felt that additional themes surrounding a performance might exceed the group's and leaders' capacities. In addition, the difficult group situation might influence the performance like a warped mirror.

Later, after a certain consolidation within the group, the preparation and concentration required by a performance would become a mutual task and aid in overcoming the difficulties. Thereafter, the performances took place on rehearsal days so that no additional time was required from the members. At these performances, the influence of the group room on the show became increasingly apparent, both on the behavior of the audience and on the themes of the stories.

A distinction developed, therefore, between the performances in the group room for a smaller number of invited guests out of familiar circles and potential clients, and other opened or closed performances in other environments for an often unknown public.

At the end of the first year, after thirty-three training sessions, which were attended by almost all members, we had achieved a certain level of cohesion in the group.

Following the first consolidation phase, signs of the phase known in group dynamics as “differentiation” appeared during the second year. Beyond this, after the summer break, a certain “normalization” period set in—members continued to be highly committed. However time after time individuals were absent, in other words parallel to the difficult group situation, the regularity of rehearsal attendance dropped.

During the first half of the second year, tensions increased. At first this was caused by the leaders' enthusiasm to introduce ideas from their training program at the School of PT during the vacation, which caused uncertainty and reluctance among the group members. After such a long summer break, they wanted and needed to start with basic regrouping, instead of immediately dealing with new forms—an important point for us as leaders and members.

In addition, the project for the Holocaust Memorial Year cast a shadow over us. The

group tried to approach this difficult subject slowly. During preparatory rehearsals, a teller became upset by a distorted enactment. Feelings of collective guilt and shame arose among the German Christian members, accentuated by the fact that one of the leaders is of Jewish heritage. Parallel to this, the number of absences from rehearsals increased—in retrospect, one can see that this was a sign that the subject was beyond our ensemble's capacities in the present situation. We had to conclude that both the leaders and group members needed much more time to approach and prepare for this difficult theme than was possible before the project began.

At the fourth performance in the group room, shortly before Christmas 1994, the focus was on taboos, painful experiences, and being torn inside. During this performance a difficult situation arose. After a scene about visiting a dead relative's grave, the teller reacted with an unmistakable "No!" and a clear rejection of the representation.

This first strong "No!" was not easy to process and produced an intense discussion in the group, during which a number of questions arose. How can the ensemble best do justice to the story and avoid upsetting the teller? How can a workable atmosphere be created, in which a storyteller feels comfortable to expose all feelings, as well as negative ones, about a scene? How can the group and each individual accept and integrate such a possible rejection during and after the performance?

A third training workshop with Jonathan Fox in May 1995 on "Metaphors in PT" offered a sort of answer to the question about how such difficult subjects could be appropriately represented. Thereafter, we distanced ourselves from participation in the Holocaust Memorial Year project. We concluded that we could not do justice to the project in the time available. A deep involvement with this subject only seemed possible with a slower, more careful preparation over a longer period. Beyond this, the risks were too great for our still young PT group. The topic was dropped for a while, and rehearsal attendance rose again.

We also determined that in the case of a longer absence, only those players should perform who had at least attended the last rehearsal before the planned performance.

At an additional one-day supervision led by Jonathan Fox for all the *Spiegelbühne* members, we experimented among other things with the idea of fully utilizing the relatively crowded group room space by alternating players during the performance between the stage and audience, so that only a part of the players were on stage at one time.

Later, we developed the role of the observing actor, who sits in the audience during the entire performance in order to comment and give feedback from this perspective after the performance.

Also the aspect of conducting took up much time, since among the leaders there were increasing tensions and conflicts. In part, this was certainly due to mixed roles (ie. private couple and leading couple), and to the unreconciled competition between different styles of conducting. However, it was also an indication of being drained and overburdened, since we were constantly aware of how much of our time was taken up in preparation before and after sessions, in light of the many aspects of such a PT group—such as, the processing and confrontations in addition to the actual training and performing time. In retrospect, due to our initial burst of energy and enthusiasm for PT, we underestimated the time commitment required of us and should have freed more space from our time-consuming professions. For this reason, this phase was very difficult for us as leaders. The necessity to create more time, by delegating roles and responsibilities between the members of the group, became more and more urgent. At the supervision, we examined the possibility that the group had to give feedback and support to the leaders.

“Time” was therefore the apt title of our next performance: we accompanied a speech about time in the context of the annual conference of the DFP (The German Psychodramatists’ Association) [*Deutscher Fachverband für Psychodrama* ]. This was an experiment in which we diverged from the classical form of a performance: during the speech, following particular sections, we converted the audience’s feedback into scenes. With this performance, we introduced a large number of our psychodrama colleagues to PT work.

Expansion

In the second year, besides differentiation and recognizing limitations there was much expansion: in the repertoire of themes, in the rehearsal space, in the number of offers, and the number of players.

For the first time, we moved a rehearsal into the private sphere. We rehearsed at the home of two of our members (their house warming), and for the first time a member conducted the rehearsal.

Following the performance in December 1994 in the group room, two audience members voiced their interest in joining the ensemble. Therefore, at the beginning of the new year (1995), or in the middle of *Spiegelbühne's* second year, these two became members after a try-out period of four rehearsals, a group discussion, and a ritual. Both are musicians, so that the until then mostly sung music could now be augmented by musical instruments. The element of music grew to be a vital part of rehearsals and performances.

The group's consolidation became apparent at the next performance in the group room. The invited audience included more and more family members and colleagues from work. Our members' families, who also had to carry the burden of their interest in PT and tolerate the time-consuming commitment, took greater interest. They attended performances more and more often, a trend which would continue.

In the second year of performing, we also received more requests to perform for larger audiences on larger stages. Therefore, it became urgent to find a larger rehearsal space (in which we had more possibilities for practicing larger movements, in order to learn how to fill a large stage).

In preparation for a performance with a large audience in the autumn, we had the opportunity to gain experience with a larger stage and a large public performance shortly before the summer break. We were offered the use of a room at the University of Frankfurt, and the chance to perform for the first time in public without knowing who would attend. Unfortunately, it hadn't been possible for us to practice in advance in this space and to make it our own. An additional difficulty was the extreme heat in this room, with its defective air-conditioning.

Shortly before the performance, a tense atmosphere developed, our group was a

little frayed and nervous. The audience was very heterogeneous and much larger than we had been used to in the group room (about sixty). With certainty, this performance was one of our less successful. However, we learned much, and it had an interesting effect, namely, the audience's stories reflected the performers' group process. For instance, one story was about a chaotic wedding in the desert.

This second phase, up until the seventieth training session, can be characterized as a phase between certainty and uncertainty, familiarity and novelty, increasing internal differentiation and aiming for expansion, as well as a phase in which we improved our understanding of time management, space needs, and personal limitations.

Following the summer break, the initial rehearsals of the third year were characterized by preparations for a performance at a big convention. During the preparations for this performance, a crisis developed due to multiple problems, some on our side and some on the side of the organizer.

On our side, due to timing we could hardly meet all together for a rehearsal. In addition, the planned conductor was forced, due to family matters, to travel for an extended time until shortly before the performance. The other leader was increasingly tied up with the preparations and the prospect of leading the convention and therefore was not in the position to support the group in this situation.

On the part of the organization, in the printing of the program for the convention there was a noteworthy omission. Our performance failed to appear in it. Evidently, the organizer had "forgotten" to leave time and room for us. Also in a poster printed later to announce the evening festivities, PT was written into the lowest margin and with a different time than the one we had verbally agreed to—now the performance would take place later in the evening, in the middle of the festivities instead of at the beginning. In the discussion with the organizer it was clear that the original agreement to the conditions of performing had been changed without consulting us, and therefore the necessary framework (time, space, attention) could no longer be created in the short time left.

Since we could not develop any alternative with the organizer, we made the decision, after rehearsing in the space, not to perform under these changed conditions. Thus, at the last minute we cancelled the performance.

Under given circumstances it seemed more important to us, on the one hand, not to expose the ensemble in their present state to such difficult performing conditions, and on the other, to prevent our PT work from degenerating at the same time into "buffet entertainment."

One member of our group was, nevertheless, registered as a participant at the convention, and as the only "representative" of the group became a target for the organizer's anger and for that of some of the convention visitors. Thereafter the themes "being abandoned," "blame" and "being in trouble" played a large role in the group.

We determined that we needed to plan our performances even more carefully, securing enough space, time, and attention, in order for the PT work to exhibit its power.

At the eighth performance in the group room in December 1995 the stories circled around themes such as "mixed messages," "separation," and the "consequences thereof."

Following the cancellation of the big performance in the autumn, we, as leaders, had reached a turning-point, and decided together to take part in leader supervision with a supervisor and psychoanalyst in Frankfurt (13 sessions from November 1995 to July 1996). The subjects of the supervision sessions included the sociometry of the group and its sociodynamic deep structure, the positions of the leaders in the group, the dynamic among couples (ourselves and the other couple), the different styles of leadership, handling tension and conflicts, and the connection to our own biographical themes.

Over the next year, the members took on even more tasks and responsibilities, first through their initiative and efforts connected with the development of publicity materials (designing a logo, information-sheet, and an ensemble T-shirt), then increasing efforts towards opportunities to perform.

We continued to pursue the goal of integrating participants into the role of conductor for rehearsals and performances in order to increase the repertoire of roles and to expand the possibilities for performance and thus raise the quality of our presentation. It became clear through the current group concept and the format of

training that we had partially achieved the difficult transition to a rotating leadership. Such a fundamental change in the framework required time and preparation in small steps in order to be accepted by everyone, since such a transformation of the group concept could cause a crisis and threaten the group's cohesion. The verbal consent had to be converted into action in appropriate phases.

In addition, the subject of competition among members and towards the leaders had made us aware of other things.

As a next step, the invited guests at the ninth performance were personally greeted and received by the hosting players. At the tenth performance, we then experimented with two group members in the audience for the entire performance, rather than substituting players part way through, in order to get more qualified feedback for our acting from the audience's perspective.

We also experimented with various forms of audience warm-ups, including movement, which proved less successful and was given up thereafter.

Following the next training session in May 1996 with Jonathan Fox on the topic "Aesthetics in PT" (at which six *Spiegelbühne* members participated) we strengthened our use of cloth and focused on our aesthetics in the portrayal of scenes.

During the Easter vacation of 1996, one member of the group took part in a conducting workshop with Jonathan Fox, and shortly thereafter the entire group had an internal training session with Jo Salas on strengthening the integration of music into our work. Music had gained in importance, and the role of the musician had become increasingly meaningful. It was possible to view competition as an opportunity to discover and build resources.

Following this, almost the entire group took part in the first German-speaking PT conference in Bad Bevensen, which three *Spiegelbühne* members had helped organize. Thereafter, a *Spiegelbühne* member again led a rehearsal for the group.

At the final performance of the season, we played for the first time privately for a member, at a garden party, and also for the first time outdoor. In preparation, we rehearsed in a meadow along the Main River, in front of a cloth backdrop, which we hung between two trees. This theatre space, surrounded by trees in open nature,



meant very difficult acoustics and much distraction from the events of the surroundings. It thus presented a challenge to the players' concentration and the carrying of voices.

The third year ended after the 107th training session.

Now an advanced phase began. The pressure to perform well was met by our own standards, although it would arise again in times of crisis. By now we had gotten to know the boundaries that members had set for themselves. We respected them, or developed a peaceful coexistence with them, and regulated the closeness and distance to one another. PT was experienced as an important resource by all of us.

That autumn was an intense time for the group. Many events—sickness, saying goodbye and new beginnings, loss and mourning in families—were coped with, in addition to which the leaders were handling unusually heavy workloads and therefore lacked time.

Again and again, we debated about space and time and chose to only accept those offers which fulfilled our interests, and to be less guided by our desire to perform. As always, payment did not play a role, we only expected the costs to be covered. With the offers that were accepted under this consideration, we were willing to go to great lengths. The themes often reflected our inner group process.

At the immediate beginning of our fourth year, we performed once again in our private sphere—at the wedding of one of our members. As an exception, we had decided to show only a few pairs and fluid sculptures as short entertainment upon presenting our joint gift. Since we could choose the time and framework and could enjoy ourselves as guests the rest of the time at the celebration, it was a fine start for the playback season which followed.

### Performance Challenges

The first commissioned performance of the season, for the jubilee of a large therapy institute in Würzburg, highlighted the following themes: "consolidating an identity," "reflecting on the past," and "developing new perspectives."

As a consequence of our past experience, we took considerable time to thoroughly

prepare for this performance and, for example, rehearsed in large spaces. Also the contact with the organizer beforehand, the preparation of the room in which we would perform, and creating optimal conditions was very time-consuming. In keeping with this, the atmosphere in the group was very supportive. For the first time after a long period, the group was fully assembled on stage. For the first time ever, partners were present—six couples.

For this big performance, we played for an audience of about 200. We performed in a large room, which we had been able to set up to suit us. We worked for the first time with stage lights, and the musician sat on a platform at players' and audience members' eye-level. The partners participated as “roadies.” For example, they took care of contact with the organizer during the warm up, prevented disturbances, and in part looked after the lighting.

To begin with, the conference participants were heavily influenced by the situation that immediately preceded us. The keynote-speaker had died a few days before, and a mourning colleague delivered his speech.

The playback work offered an important opportunity to relieve the strain, which the participants intensely utilized. The difficult situation became increasingly relaxed and the different generations in the institution found room to tell their stories.

They spoke about looking back at the beginnings, crises, possible prospects for the institute, and opportunities for the future in an increasingly difficult employment landscape. It was clear that playback theatre was helpful as a means to cope.

At our next performance, which again took place in the group room, three generations appeared in all the stories, and in the following performance shortly before Christmas, for the first time a woman far advanced in pregnancy sat in the audience. Reflecting societal developments, one teller talked about the threat of unemployment, which would in the following year also become acute in our group.

At the celebration of the year's end, which we planned together, each brought something to contribute that they had prepared at home, and added it to the composition prepared by all. Even in the shaping of the celebration, changes were apparent in the increasingly differentiated roles and members taking on various responsibilities.

Influenced by the events in our families at the beginning of the new year, an intense sharing took place in the group about death and the loss of family members. In this mutual exchange of our existential experiences a closeness and openness grew among us.

The next performance was completely influenced by this and the images and stories portrayed were particularly intense and exact.

At the following sixteenth performance, we let ourselves be tempted into changing the planned framework. Due to an unusually high demand we quickly moved the performance location from the group room to a room at the university, with which we were already familiar.

The audience consisted of a number of individuals, some smaller groups and one larger group. This larger subgroup had journeyed there together and was therefore already well warmed up to one another. Therefore, it was difficult to bring the various groups together.

The stories told included those of "threat," "limitations," "being attacked," and "defending."

At the following large performance at a memorial conference in honor of Karlfried Graf Durkheim, an important theme became the discomfort following the loss of a spiritual leader and feeling uncertain about the path of spiritual searching. Although three of our members were unable to attend, the others participated in the conference. In the group, a general feeling of alienation arose in the context of the conference events, the irritation and stress grew due to high expectations. By withdrawing into a separate room and intensely discussing and processing the obvious effects of the general atmosphere on the members of the ensemble, we were able to regain cohesion. It was again possible to concentrate on the situation's demands, the audience's needs, and our opportunity. The scenes of the performance dealt with "the necessity to break taboos," "the dangers of doing so," "the fear of being alone, and "being responsible for one's own path."

At this conference, it became particularly clear that PT is well suited for the closing ceremony of a conference when it is well prepared. We also learned how important it is that the performers are able to find the appropriate distance from and/or

closeness to the audience. Through this experience, the spiritual themes resonating in our group became tangible.

In April 1997, five members of the *Spiegelbühne* took part in the next training session with Jonathan Fox on “The Themes that Connect the Stories in PT,” and at about the same time, the musician attended the workshop offered in another region by Jo Salas about music in PT.

In preparation for a necessary change of rehearsal space, due to the future unavailability of the group room we had used until then, we transferred our rehearsals to a new room which was three times the size of our previous space.

The atmosphere in this new room was more impersonal than before, the switch and the pending loss of the group room as a set rehearsal space and home base for the group posed a decisive point. After the initial discomfort and diffusion, the group slowly adjusted to the new space and prepared for the next performance.

For the first time, this performance was organized by a member of the group, who was also responsible for building the contact and for the preparations on location. It would take place in Thuringia at the annual meeting of a denominational umbrella organization of family-, marriage-, and life counseling centers on the subject of relationships (“Him, Her, and the Third in the Relationship”). During the preparations, we dealt with the differences between East and West Germany after the reunification and continued to work with the spiritual themes. We considered prejudices concerning the Christian Church from our own backgrounds, memories, and religious upbringings. Only one member participated in the conference and served as a bridge between us and the events of the day.

For the first time, we traveled as a group into East Germany to perform before an audience of about 200. We arrived in small groups the night before and rehearsed briefly before we joined the conference festivities at around 9 p.m. The next morning, Sunday, we were supposed to perform after breakfast and before the closing church service, in order for the participants to evaluate the conference together.

A platform had been set up as a stage in the large room and due to the poor acoustics, a microphone had to be used. Since we began preparing ourselves early

(7 a.m.), it was possible to interact with the East German custodians, who had arranged the room and chairs to serve our needs. For them we played a few pairs and fluids on the existing social differences and their reactions to these.

The audience, which included a few members of the clergy, were well warmed up after three days of working together. Some very deep stories were told, dealing with the tensions and conflicts in the supporting organizations regarding spiritual experiences, religion, sexuality, and taboos.

At this last performance preceding the Symposium in Kassel, we made use of the supportive atmosphere to completely substitute the players with audience members for the first time, an experience which participants valued and enjoyed. In the original sense of PT, it was possible for people to take their stories into their own hands and to perform for themselves.

#### German-Speaking PT Network

Parallel to building up *Spiegelbühne*, it was important to us as leaders to maintain contact with other playback theatre groups and to actively help create a German-speaking PT network. In autumn of 1994 the first meeting of those interested in German-speaking playback took place in Stuttgart. This initiative, from Annette Henne, Jürgen Hermann and Marlies Arping, was a result of the completed Practice and Leadership classes at the School of Playback Theatre in New York, also attended by Marianne Tobler, Daniel Feldhender and Susanne Ramsauer. Around 25 participants adopted the idea of continual communication through such regular meetings.

As a result, in the autumn of 1995 the second meeting took place in Offenbach. There it was decided to organize a large conference at which as many as possible active playbackers and people interested in playback could get to know one another and exchange information in order to build up a network for the German-speaking countries.

Three members of the *Spiegelbühne* belonged to this organizing committee.

In April 1996, about ninety people participated in the first large conference in Bad Bevensen (in Lower Saxony), with Jo Salas and Jonathan Fox as guests. At that

time the idea of a first PT Symposium at the University of Kassel was already being discussed. Themes emerged for discussion, including subliminal competition between existing groups, differences in styles and concepts between the generations of active playbackers, and sharing among playback theatre leaders (as in the form of intervision already practiced at the PT meeting in December 1996 in Zurich).

## Conclusion and Perspectives

The ensemble is relatively homogenous in regard to age and social backgrounds.

The four-year process of development of our playback theatre group can be divided into the following phases: intense group dynamics, first consolidation and preliminary integration; oscillation between security and insecurity, limitation and expansion; consolidation of our identity and securing the quality of our dramatic expression; and wider external orientation.

In our work together, subjects came up which formed a running theme touching on the fundamental human issues of birth and death and sickness and health, in our own generation (partners, siblings, friends, and colleagues), the preceding (parents') generation, and the following generation of children (our own or those of our sisters and brothers). Other themes dealt with partnerships (everyday life, marriage, divorce, crises, family planning) and careers (everyday life, changes, dealing with conflicts and tensions, coping with crises and unemployment).

A trend arose towards a stronger external orientation, also recognizable in our choice of space. To begin with, rehearsals and performances took place only in the group room and/or partially in our members' private sphere, which encouraged introspection (group building and internal understanding). Later, we chose other spaces for practicing and performing and so opened ourselves for other audiences, other issues, and a larger public.

In addition to the continuous interaction between individual, political and spiritual themes of the group, the future life of *Spiegelbühne* will probably be greatly influenced by the following: the change of location and the consequences this will have on our group cohesion; the increased incorporation of members into the role of

conductors and their individual further training in PT; and possible changes in the composition of the group due to changing priorities of individual members and/or personal and career changes.

We have described the process of our group from an internal perspective, since as involved participants we are affected on many levels. Influenced by the inner life of the group, on the one hand, and by our relationship as a married couple, who founded and lead the group, on the other, we can only be aware of parts of the entire process.

Supervision and support in our roles as leaders was important to us through discourse with other experienced leaders, being embedded in an international PT context, and aiding the formation of a German-speaking PT movement.

And naturally, despite all the self-awareness and the knowledge of our own limitations and group dynamics, there still remain blind spots, false perceptions, temptations, entanglements, fears, rivalries, aggression, and spent capacities.

We attempt, through continued communication and reflection, to stay on track. For us this often involves recognizing, accepting, and overcoming the differences between our ideals and realistic possibilities with humor and good will.

In the end, the challenge lies in growing together and gaining awareness of people and the stories they tell.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from German by Rachel Getzoff, in cooperation with the authors.