



Weaving Playback Theatre with Theatre of the Oppressed

By Hannah Fox

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Since 2000 I have been exploring ways to weave the Theatre of the Oppressed technique into my playback theatre work. I find the two methodologies to be extremely complimentary in the effort of addressing conflict, inviting dialogue and building community. They have a great overlap in their history, approach and mission; and they also diverge in at certain points. I view PT and T.O. as cousins—related, yet different. Another metaphor I use to describe playback and Theatre of the Oppressed is that are two different doorways leading to the same house. My expertise is in playback, not in T.O., and therefore the intention of this talk is to share with you my experiences and discoveries so far in weaving the forms. For five years I have been collaborating with a leading T.O. facilitator in the States to design workshops in which both PT and T.O. are utilised. To begin with I will compare and contrast the origins and development of each method, and then outline what I see as the similarities and differences. Lastly, I will share a few examples of PT/ T.O. “weaves” that I have found effective.

Trajectories

Playback theatre was born in the USA in the 1970s, conceived by Jonathan Fox, and developed by Jo Salas and the original company. Its influences were the American experimental theatre movement, storytelling of indigenous cultures, and psychodrama. In the early years, playback was described as existing on a spectrum between art and therapy, and its constituency was a predominantly white and middle class. Playback has expanded in many directions over the last thirty years. The form is now practiced on every continent and in many different cultures and

languages. There has been a conscious effort to use the playback form as an agent of social change. This impulse, to address the social layers of communities and apply playback to anti-oppression work and education, for example, or to use playback theatre to help with reconciliation in war-torn countries, has grown stronger in the last decade.

Theatre of the Oppressed was created in the 1960s in Brazil by director/activist Augusto Boal. From its inception, T.O. was designed for socio-political change. Boal believes that all theatre is necessarily political. Neither art nor therapy was of concern. Boal created his theatre to empower the peasants of his country so that they may stand up to the aristocracy. The work became such a threat that Boal was sent into exile and ended up in Europe for a period of time. It was then he discovered that, unlike in Latin America, people in the West were plagued by demons, or “police,” which were more internal/psychological, rather than external. Boal designed a new structure called “Cop in the Head” to address this different kind of oppression. T.O. was moving from the political towards the psychological. Perhaps over the years, as T.O. spread around the world and reached many languages and cultures, its practitioners have paid more attention to the art and aesthetic of the form. Therefore, one could observe that the development of T.O. has traveled in an opposite direction than that of playback theatre, bringing them even closer together.

I have constructed a graph to illustrate these trajectories.

Similarities and distinctions

As mentioned earlier, PT and TO are similar yet distinct. They both use personal story to illuminate the social connections and issues of a community. They both use image theatre. Both rely on audience participation. Both forms emphasize the citizen actor. Both Boal and Fox were influenced by the teachings of Paolo Friere.

Below is a list of similarities and distinctions between the techniques.

Similarities

- Theatre as a vehicle for change
- Image-based theatre (thought made visible)
- Interactive theatre
- Created around same time in history (1960s/70s)
- Influence of Paolo Friere
- Citizen actors
- Use of personal story
- Both forms practiced worldwide

Distinctions

- Origins (country, class, culture)
- Personal vs. political: PT is more personal in nature. In PT, the teller/story is held sacred and honoured in its pure form. In T.O., the teller/story is “used” as a kind of springboard for public exploration and is mined for its socio-political issues
- Playback Theatre emphasizes artistic and performance elements
- PT is emotional (catharsis); TO is practical (dialogue, “rehearsal for the future”)
- In T.O. audience members come up onto the stage as “spectators” and join action whereas in PT audience members and tellers typically watch enactment

Possible weaves

There are endless possibilities of how playback and Theatre of the Oppressed forms can be used in conjunction. One way is to use playback short forms (fluid sculptures, pairs, etc.) to warm up group or audience members to their stories and then

do forum theatre (T.O.'s most common structure). Another possibility is to do some playback--short forms and then a story--and replay this story as a forum piece.

(Forum stories need to be about a *current unresolved* problem in one's life.) Moving in the other direction, you can begin with T.O. (warm ups, Forum, Rainbow of Desire, etc.) and then do playback afterwards in order to process *feelings* people may have about the story. I find that playback helps to address the emotional layer of story.

In school performances, after an enactment, my company sometimes will freeze the actors and do some forum theatre around a particular issue, using audience suggestions. Finally, I frequently use T.O. warm up exercises in my playback rehearsals and workshops. Many of these exercises are designed to warm up the very muscles or skills needed for the playback form. Similarly, my colleague, T.O. practitioner Marc Weinblatt, always uses the playback forms in his T.O. workshops and performances.

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