A Comparative Study of Rituals seen in Playback Theatre and Japanese Tea Ceremony

By Hiroko Ishii
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1998

The spirit of tea is the search to do good and not to do evil. It is a greeting that reaches out and seeks the good in others. It is the wisdom that comes from applying knowledge each moment in response to circumstance.

It is the host inviting a guest to share peace in a bowl of tea. (1)

I said at the beginning that we’re going to tell stories and try to recreate theatre as it was in the olden days. And in the olden days, of course, the stories were all about heroes, and heroic deeds, and huge and wonderful events. Our stories are humbler. But they’re for our time. And tonight, who have shared your moments and your experiences, have shared your wisdom and your love and your own heroism. (2)
Having been born into a family where my aunt worked as a Tea Ceremony teacher, the rituals of tea and tea drinking were a part of my everyday childhood.

“One does not need to look at one’s watch in a tea room. Just notice the scripts written on the scrolls. Notice the flower arrangement, the room settings, what utensils are being used that day, study and appreciate the sweets being served, and you shall know.”

These were the words of my Aunt Kazue. She never allowed anyone to enter her teahouse wearing a watch.

Although I was still quite young, my aunt often read and told me of the meaning of the scripts on the scroll. One of her favorite line was **Ichigo-Ichie**, which translates to “Let’s treasure and respect this moment of togetherness. For we shall never be able to meet again in our path called life” I am sure she never imagined that little Hiroko to someday pursue a road in Arts, called Playback theatre, which also takes in this spirit of Ichigo-Ichie.

With my tiny child hands, I too often participated in the ceremony. It was great fun to invite friends and serve sweets and tea. To a small child, it was more like playing house with good friends. The sweets served in the ceremony also symbolized and represented some element of the season, or about that specific month.

There were fishes, flowers, plants, moon, animals, (just to name a few) which absolutely intrigued and fascinated a little child’s heart.

Tea Ceremony to me, meant people “getting together”. It was a moment where even adults took the time to listen, rest, and respect.

**Let’s respect and share this moment of togetherness**, can be said to be something I have longed and yearned so strongly for many years.

The brief moments of calm and peace I felt in the tearoom as a little child, now takes its form in a more dynamic way, called Playback theatre.
As I said good-bye to the guests who came to the Tea Ceremony, I remember saying “Promise to come again soon”. This little Hiroko still lives in me now as I wave good bye to the guests who come to our Playback performance.

History

Just as in any school of Art, whether it may be literature, painting, theatre or music, there always exists a preceding thought, school, religious or cultural influence prevalent.

In Playback Theatre, the elements date back to the tribal days of festivals, magic, religion and mysticism. The influence of non-literary culture, the days of Homer, the days of Canterbury tales by Chaucer, where the storyteller walked around town to communicate a wisdom and knowledge in the story, which were shared by the public, seems to influence the spirit of Playback Theatre as of this day.

Having been started by Mr. Jonathan Fox in the 1970’s, he states as such.

“It was a way to bring an ancient way into the present, except that where traditional societies sang of Gods and Heroes known and revered by the entire clan, we would sing about ourselves, in all our ordinariness. My hope and deep conviction was that in this process we would feel elevated, as if in contact with the Gods, and at the end a disparate community would cohere.”(3)

In the olden days, time proceeded with a different rhythm. “Community” and “knowledge sharing” was an integral part to people’s lives. Although the form of communication may have varied between different social classes of people in the society, physical gathering meant being part of a group, of sharing and belonging.

The modern age has emphasized on the beauty of independence, rather than interdependence. Knowledge sharing through more practical methods is now being promoted. The ultimate being the Internet.
Although the WWW provides overwhelming amount of information, and it’s use being unlimited, it does not quench people’s thirst for something more instinctive in all of us. Namely, our sense and desire to want to be with other human beings, **to hear and to be heard.**

Playback Theatre’s true history is currently being created throughout the world today. Since this form of theatre addresses the more instinctive human needs, it’s seeds are steadily blossoming in different countries and cultures as a way to balance where the society has gone too much towards the reverse direction.

The history of Tea Ceremony on the other hand, goes back quite far. For the interest of the readers, I shall only outline the highlights.

As it can be seen from the chronicle, tea (not necessarily tea ceremony) was first introduced to Japan during the regency of Prince Shotoku. (572-622)

This period was one of the “highlight periods” of importing many cultures and knowledge from China. Among these were Buddhism and tea.

In 806, famous priest by the name of “Priest Kukai” first introduced brewing of tea into our culture, which at first was utilized for medicinal purposes by the court nobles. Later, tea drinking spread among the priest as being an essential part of Buddhist monk’s well being.

By 14th century, tea drinking spread from the upper classes to samurai, Buddhist clergy, and even to commoners. During this period, Tocha, (a special game, contest) to detect different types of tea from various regions became quite popular. It was around this time that some upper class members of the society started designating a specific room for tea drinking purposes. Such rooms were often decorated with many imported goods from China. This practice can be said to be the early seeds of “Tea House”

Under Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, (1435-90) a more formalized style of tea drinking was established. Since the room setting was still quite lavishing, other school of tea masters appeared
in reaction to this trend. Such tea masters as Murata Shoko (1422-1502) is famous for pursuing the simple spirit of tea, rather than its glamour.

Many tea masters followed since then, such as Sen Rikyu (or, Sokai 1522-91), or Furuta Oribe.

As true in many cultures, women were considered “not clean”, and therefore were not allowed to practice tea ceremony until much later in history.

It was only after the Sino-Japanese war (1894-95) that women started participating in tea ceremony through the endeavors of Ennosai, the 13th generation of grand tea master of Urasenke. (One of the two major schools of tea ceremony in Japan) who taught war widows and other women, many of whom obtained instructor’s diplomas. Gradually the way of tea also became known and practiced in the West. In 1906, Tenshin Okakura published The book of tea in the United States. In this he explained the metaphysical aspects of tea to his Western audience. But it was not until after World War II that a real interest developed in the West. (4)

The spirit of Tea Ceremony, the sharing and Peace, also exists as an important foundation in the school of Playbak Theatre.

Environment

We found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct “live” communion. The rich Theatre depends on an artistic kleptomania…Consequently, I propose poverty in the theatre. (5)
The Playback Theatre environment varies depending on the country, company, or by each unique performing situation. If in a workshop environment, it may be carried out in a company conference room, or in a school classroom. (Performance can also take place under such conditions) In some extreme cases, it may even take a form similar to that of street performance. Of course, Playback Theatre is also performed in true Theatre settings, similar to that of commercial theatre.

Regardless of the environmental circumstances the spirit, ritual, and the framework for Playback Theatre remains same in all situations.

The same idea can also be observed in the world of Tea Ceremony. Tea Ceremony can also take many forms and styles and different settings. For an example, “Nodate” (Tea Ceremony performed outdoors) can be classified as being similar to a Playback Performance being given outdoors. There is also “Obondate” (Performing Tea Ceremony on one plate) can be a portable, cost and space saving method to perform Tea Ceremony. If we were to classify a fully lighted commercial theatre stage situation as more “formal”, official Tea Ceremony performed in an official teahouse would fall into this category.

Although the environmental setting is an important ritualistic element, it is important not to forget what gets communicated in that environment.

“A lot of misunderstanding of the art of the tea ceremony stems from the mistaken impression that it is the purely physical act of making and drinking tea, a pleasant pastime in which a beverage is enjoyed. However, this is the only the superficial aspect of the tea ceremony. What cannot easily be observed is the spiritual side of the ceremony implied in the name Chanoyu. Besides the very disciplined frame of mind that is prerequisite for performing tea, there is a special code of ethics shared by the host and guests that makes chanoyu a distinctly Japanese Art.”(6)
How welcoming mood is created

In a Playback Performance, people usually gather to a theatre, or a certain room setting previously notified by the company members. The group (audience) may know, or not know each other when they first gather.

Unlike commercial theatre, the company members usually stand around to physically greet and welcome the guests. The welcoming gesture is often physical (waving, smiling, bowing, and hugging) and verbal. (Saying hello)

Tea Ceremony on the other hand takes a more non-verbal approach. Instead of a physical or verbal “hello”, the physical environment (setting) is carefully set in a way, which suggests and communicates to the guest “Thank you for coming. You are very welcomed here”.

The “water”, which is considered as a purifying element in the nature, and a source of life, is sprinkled and used extensively around the entrance gate and the garden leading to the Tea House. This symbolizes “hello” and “welcome” which is an important ritual both in Playback Theatre and Tea Ceremony.

In Playback Theatre, upon the opening of a performance, music, or a musical chorus introduction by the actors is often utilized. (This may vary according to each company) This is to notify the guests that the stage curtain is about to go up, or that it has already gone up. Usually, this is followed by a more formal opening remark given by the conductor.

In case of Tea Ceremony, the garden leading to the teahouse usually serves as a prelude to the actual performance. By walking through a garden and stepping on a flat walking (stepping) stone, guests would appreciate a well water sprinkled garden, appreciate the plants and flowers, listen to the sounds of the water as they slowly approach the Tea House.

As similar to the opening scene of a Playback performance, the audience is drawn into a different world, filled with sense of welcome and peace, with a little spice of mysticism. Same can be said
about Tea Ceremony. Step by step, the guests detach themselves from the “outside world” to a more calm and a peaceful world of Tea Ceremony.

In an evening performance (both in Playback and Tea Ceremony), the element of mysticism and dream-like element is even more enhanced. Just imagine a relatively dark room with only the stage area lit up. On the stage, the audience will notice crates, cloths, musical instrument, and chairs. The different colored spotlights illuminate the open stage area. This kind of setting alone can induce many stories in people’s minds. It stimulates our sense for “Something is about to happen!”

In Tea Ceremony, an evening ceremony is called “Yakai”. The faint light of a candle placed in a stone lantern now lights the garden, which leads to the teahouse. The stone path is only occasionally lit, just enough to make it to the Teahouse.

In Yakai, the guests too will be holding a small paper lantern (also lit by candles) to guide their path to the Teahouse. Finally, near the teahouse, the host too would carry a lantern to invite the guests into the Teahouse.

This scene of host and guest both holding a small lantern and **passing the light into the Teahouse** often reminds me of the moment in Playback Theatre, where the conductor invites his/her first teller on to the stage. This is the moment when the stage unfolds into the world of stories, just as the performance unfolds in the Teahouse.

**Stimulating the audience**

The beginning section of a Playback theatre performance usually starts with asking the audience questions about how their day was, or about their journey to the performance site. (If the performance has a specific theme associated, the conductor may ask the audience questions relating to this theme) This would be the “warm-up” phase to the actual performance. In case of
workshops, member introduction, mapping, and other sociometric and ice breaking type of exercises will be utilized to enhance the group process.

In the performance situation however, the conductor will pick up comments from the audience and usually enact it in a form known as “Fluid Sculpture”.

This phase of the performance introduces and prepares the audience into the world of improvisational theatre. It also helps the audience (group) to share a brief moment of other member’s emotions, which supports the making of a safe and accepting environment which is very important foundation for Playback theatre.

In Tea Ceremony, before the actual ceremony (performance) starts, the guests receive this “warm up phase” in a non-verbal manner.

As it was mentioned in the previous section, the garden leading to the Tea house serves as the “warm up”, finally building the guests up to the actual Tea house. But even after the guests actually “enter” the Teahouse, the room is still empty without an official host. This phase would attribute to the opening fluid sculpture phase in Playback Theatre. In an absolute silence, how are the guests introduced to the performance? Here, the room setting speaks to the guests.

Flower arrangement

The flower arrangement in the Teahouse is not just for aesthetic reasons alone.

It would convey to the audience the season, and the “theme”, or an “intention” of a host for that specific performance. Once there was a story like this. Tea Master Rikyu for a Tea Ceremony invited a famous shogun by the name of Hideyoshi. In those days, this great Shogun was starting to be criticized by the public for being extremely materialistic, spending precious tax money into decorating the palace. Wishing to convey a message of “too much is vulgar” to Hideyoshi, Rikyu requested to his deciples to cut off all the flowers of “morning glory” which was in full bloom then, decorating the pathway leading to the garden, and to the Tea house.

Hideyoshi was furious upon seeing that all the flowers were gone. He was ready to even terminate Rikyu for his act of disrespect. However, upon entering the teahouse, he noticed that
there was a flower arrangement with only one morning glory, beautifully arranged and in full bloom. The message was so clear, and Hideyoshi was deeply ashamed.

As it can be understood by this story, the flower arrangement sets the mood and atmosphere for that specific performance.

Utensils

Utensils placed in the room upon initial entry would be the kettle and the charcoal arranging utensils. Incense would be placed in the charcoal, which reminds the guests of the great Mother Nature. The quiet sound of the boiling water is usually associated with the wind running through the forest.

This also reminds the audience about the “theme” of that performance. The utensils used in the tea ceremony are almost all handmade. A perfectly rounded bowl for an example is not preferred in the Tea Ceremony, for it is considered too artificial and manmade. Just as in life, nothing is perfect. Therefore, perfectly created utensil is not utilized in Tea ceremony.

Scroll

The scrolls used in the Tea Ceremony may be a painting, or calligraphy of certain phrase or a poem.

When the guest first arrives at the tea room, he goes directly to the alcove to examine the scroll before exchanging greetings with the host, since the host has taken considerable trouble in choosing a scroll for this particular season or occasion. When this is done, the guest goes to his seat, from where he greets the host, venturing some opinion on the beauty of the scroll. He will also express his gratitude to his host for having taken such pains to entertain him. (7)

This scroll appreciation process is often considered as one of the most important moments for starting a tea ceremony. This phase is where the heart of the host and the guest come together.
In the opening phase of a playback performance, the conductor asks questions, makes comments and relaxes and slowly guides the audience into the world of stories. Each conductor may do this little differently. This part is left up to the sense of aesthetics and creativity of the conductor.

This act of carefully observing the group (audience) also applies for the Tea master. He must carefully think about who his guests will be that day, and based on this understanding, arrange all the utensils, sweets, (and sometimes meals) scrolls, flower arrangements in a creative manner so that the experience becomes meaningful for the guests.

Creativity in Chanoyu(world of Tea) cannot be taught; it comes from within the tea master. A pupil of Rikyu once asked the master about the mysteries of the tea ceremony, to which Rikyu replied; “You suggest a feeling of coolness in the summer, and coziness in the winter; when you burn charcoal you see that the water boils, when you make tea you see that it tastes good. There are no secrets”. His pupil seemed unsatisfied with this enigmatic reply since it was obvious that anyone could do this, to which Rikyu replied that if such a man did exist, he would willingly become his pupil. (8)

The Tea Ceremony Performance/ Enacting a story

After a sufficient audience warm up, the conductor asks for a story. When the first teller is chosen, he/she is greeted by the conductor and the troupe. After the teller takes the seat, the conductor officially greets and welcomes the teller and introduces this person to the audience.

The ritual of how the questions are asked, varies depending on the conductor. However, there are several key points, which all conductors need to be aware.

1. Paying respect to the teller

2. Accurately getting the information to communicate to the troupe members and to the audience.
3. Paying attention to the “heart of the story”

4. Paying attention to how the story relates to the group (Sociometry)

All this is done, while on the surface, it looks as if the conductor is having a very friendly conversation with the teller. The story is carefully arranged and woven into a theatre step by step.

In Tea ceremony, the ritual of the performance itself is more visual.

Upon the official entry of the host, he/she will be bringing in the utensils one at a time into the teahouse. Just as in Playback theatre, maximum attention is being placed on each and every movement and its pace. One needs to have a calmness of the mind to perform this smoothly. If in haste, it will break the ritual, and make the guests feel restless. This is also true in Playback Theatre.

The origin of temae has been attributed to Shuko. He said that by concentrating the mind on the gestures as a meditative exercise, temae acquired a deep spiritual meaning for the student. (9)

The ritual of Tea Ceremony can be classified into 4 areas.

1. Arrangement of utensils (This would be equivalent to the interview stage in Playback theatre)
   Each utensil will be brought into the room one at a time.

2. Purification (Act of cleansing the utensils/ this is done before and after the drinking process, and it is all a part of the performance.) The preparation stage by the troupe after the conductor states “Let’s watch”, and the ending ritual can be equivalent to this stage.

3. Tea making (This would be equivalent to the actual performance by the troupe)

4. Calmness of the mind (This is also a required state of the mind for the conductor and the troupe during a Playback Performance)

5. Acknowledgement: The ritual of bowing to the host and to other guests is an important ritual of acknowledgement and gratitude in Tea Ceremony.

The Japanese are fond of aisatsu (greetings). Ai means “friendship”, and satsu means “to draw forth each other’s good qualities through acquaintance”. Exchanging bows is true aisatsu only when it is felt that at that instant something good is brought out from both parties.(10)
The acknowledgement to the teller by the conductor and the troupe is also a very important ritual in Playback theatre.

Conclusion

The rituals of Tea Ceremony and Playback theatre both exist for a particular reason. In any form of Art, a certain frame, or a ritual exist so that the essence of that Art can be expressed in its maximum strength.

Also, the existence of frame, or a ritual helps and satisfies the instinctive element of “safety” in all of us. What would happen if an orchestra started playing a symphony without a clear cue from the conductor?

Harmony is created only when there exists a ritual. Of course, the form of the ritual maybe obvious, or not so obvious. People may argue that some are not ritual, but a natural phenomenon. However, is this really so?

Human beings are unique creatures of nature. We pursue freedom, but freedom without any boundary usually puts us under great fear and loss. With a proper ritual, I believe that more freedom can be created, for the fear and loss will be alleviated, or eliminated.

In the old days, many shoguns had their secret consultation in the teahouse. This practice was not for any strategic reasons, but for psychological reasons. Being in the teahouse, in the calm environment surrounded by nature, with the ritual of paying utmost respect to everything surrounding him, they were able to talk and discuss without totally indulging in their emotions of fear and anger.

Similarly in Playback theatre where many strong emotions are sometimes dealt, it is extremely important to have a proper ritual in place, so that everyone involved in the theatre can remain in a “safe environment” while dealing with some of these strong and sensitive emotions.
The sensitive balance, created between the conductor, teller, troupe and the audience all stems from a solid foundation of a ritual. Without it, Playback theatre can become quite out of hand and less meaningful.

There is an interesting quote from a book on Tea Ceremony.

Today’s world is filled with knowledge. Knowledge and wisdom, I think have to be considered on different levels. In our highly developed world, knowledge can usually be easily obtained if one so desires and makes the effort. It is wisdom, however, that enables one to apply acquired knowledge and give it value. Knowledge is obtained by reading books and newspapers, watching television, hearing lectures and so on. But knowledge in itself is empty. To be of value, it must be put into practice and continuously applied in response to ever-changing circumstances. This then, is wisdom. It is the best application of knowledge. (11)

Playback theatre is a place where one can gain knowledge, wisdom and healing. It is a theatre, which speaks to our heart and soul. It is a theatre where people share themselves with others. It is an environment where people are not afraid to make mistakes. It is a theatre of acceptance of love. It is a place where knowledge shared by the whole group can be transformed into a deep wisdom.

Therefore, the ritual has to be place, because it basically boils down to “respect” which is an extremely important element for anyone to open up to all the possibilities I have mentioned above.

Once, Rikyu, the famous tea master said as such.

Receiving guests within the microcosm of the tea setting necessitates the implementation of particular measures to maintain this tranquility. Sen Rikyu believed that certain guidelines were necessary for the host and guest during a tea gathering. But they are principles that can be followed whether in the tearoom or the everyday world.

The principles of Tea Ceremony are harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility. Harmony is the oneness of host and guest with the flowing rhythms of nature. The harmonious atmosphere of a tea gathering depends upon the union of the host and guest, a union that must be absolutely sincere and truthful. When the guests enter the microcosm of the tea setting, they should be in
harmony with it, just as is the host. Respect is the sincerity of heart that allows one to have an open relationship with the other participants, humbly recognizing their dignity. To discipline oneself to be humble enables one to see the world as it truly is. Purity is removing the dust of the world from one’s heart and mind. Cleaning in preparation for a tea gathering, the host also establishes order within himself. As he sees to the details of the teahouse and the garden path, he is no less attending to his own consciousness and to the state of mind with which he will serve his guests. Tranquility comes with the constant practice of harmony, respect, and purity in everyday life. In this state of mind, having found peace within oneself, a bowl of tea can truly be shared with another. (12)

The sharing of “bowl of tea” in its essence is “sharing of the moment, here and now, with mutual respect for each other”. The term *Ichigo Ichie* summarizes this essence, and this idea holds true for both Tea Ceremony and Playback Theatre.

In both school of art, many years of practice and study will be required to perfect its art form. However, both art cannot be complete without the presence of the guest, or the teller. When this element is fed into its form(ritual), it starts to pulsate into people’s awareness.

This spiritual “sharing” creates a unique space of peace and wisdom within the environment.

Footnotes


References


