Gathering Voices
Essays on Playback Theatre

How Playback Theatre Works: A Matter for Practical Research
Heinrich Dauber

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How Playback Theatre Works

A Matter for Practical Research

Heinrich Dauber

People and countries serve as mirrors for each other. They are also, of course, themselves, just as a mirror is itself and not that which it reflects. However, they seldom recognize what they are in reality: mostly they see that which is hidden deep inside only within a reciprocal reflection. To differentiate between the “mirror” and “reflection,” when in addition reflected in the multifaceted realm of a living mind and a human being, is not easy. This ability to keep the reflector and reflection separate is so poor and relatively undeveloped in us, that in times to come they will undoubtedly laugh at us as we laugh at monkeys.” Laurens van der Post

After almost twenty-five years of successful playback theatre practice in over thirty countries around the globe, in completely different cultures as well as social contexts, it does not seem too soon to turn our attention to the question, How does playback theatre work?, long posed by the founder of playback theatre:

There is need for research: to develop new methods for the documentation and analysis of oral theatre; to study the levels of context-text related communication as they become manifest in an improvisational performance; to examine the spontaneous creative process of the improvisational actor (the results might have usefulness far outside the field of theatrical studies). Most needed are historical and comparative studies of nonscripted theatre. These should include studies of the transition between preliterary and literary as well as the interstices between literary and postliterary genres. Exactly what actual connections have there been between the various NST (nonscripted theatre) practitioners, both horizontally and vertically? I am fascinated by what appears to be a central European hot spot in the germination of the NST
movement: were the progenitors Goethe, Laban, Brecht, Moreno, and colleagues as yet unknown?³

The University of Kassel, in the form of an academic symposium on playback theatre, took up this wish from Jonathan Fox in May of 1997. It was done, not as so often is the case in the relationship between science and practice, as an expression of scientific hegemonic desire, but as an “act of service” towards the worldwide playback movement.

That such a symposium did not take place earlier can be attributed in part to the fact that it was only possible after the publication of Jo Salas's book, Improvising Real Life,⁴ which informed a wider audience of the fundamental aims and principals of playback theatre. Jonathan Fox himself in his own ground-breaking book, Acts of Service, which was written earlier but published later, remained caught up in an apologetic argument towards the established theatre and theatre criticism in the US. As he said, their “iron grip on a literary orientation of theatre” and their steadfast refusal to recognize playback theatre and other forms of NST is unfortunate, but nevertheless should not justify the ongoing separation of playback theatre and text-oriented theatre. This would miss the core of the matter for Jonathan Fox. Playback theatre is more than just nonscripted theatre. In fact, the uniqueness of playback theatre is based far more on the moral standards of combining spontaneity and service. In his conclusion, Fox expresses it this way: “For me, what is most important is to create a theatre that is neither sentimental nor demonic, hermetic nor confrontational, but ultimately a theatre of love.” ⁵

But can a “theatre of love” be researched? And what are the fundamental questions? One thing seems certain to me. The international playback movement is not dependent on research, any more than the international theatre and art scenes are. Nevertheless, as soon as it makes sense to incorporate playback theatre as an integral part of studies in teaching, therapy, or social work,⁶ or when training is offered, as at the School of Playback Theatre in New York, Germany, and Japan, then the necessity arises to legitimize these institutions. Therefore, the discussion about researching playback theatre is to be established within an academic and institutional context.

The most general question, often posed by playback theatre practitioners as well as
by outsiders, is simply, How does playback work? In a German context this question sounds something like this, “How is it that the players bring to the stage things they cannot possibly know and yet precisely correspond to the storyteller’s experience? That scene must have been talked about in advance. It cannot work any other way.”

Many, including experienced practitioners of playback theatre, hold the opinion that this question can only be answered intuitively, rather than scientifically. As a playback practitioner myself, I am partially inclined to agree. However, as a social scientist, I do not share this perspective, because in my view it is based on a restricted positivistic view of science.

The Four Questions

For the purpose of research I choose the following (tentative) definition: playback theatre is both an individual as well as collective experience, which on the one hand can only be understood from a subjective perspective—i.e., through (individual and collective) self-reflection, and on the other hand can be described from an objective perspective as an objective experience of a theatre performance in a particular social context.

Let me give an example. During the weeks of a strike at the University of Kassel in December 1997, playback performances from various groups were held on the subject “Strike.” At one of these performances, in which German students told about the strike, the conductor asked an Iranian to talk about his experience striking under the Shah and Khomeini. The brief, mostly implicit story was highly dramatic and deeply moving for everyone present from the following different perspectives:

From the individually subjective perspective the story was very present for the teller. On this day, for the first time after many years, he had again taken part in a demonstration, and he had told his story for the first time in public.

From the collectively subjective perspective there arose a long discussion within the group and with other playback players who had seen the performance, whether and to what extent this kind of dramatic story can be publicly performed.

From the individually objective perspective the players, particularly the main
character, succeeded intuitively in portraying the decisive focus of the story in an artistic manner (“I go out. I take part. And I will go out again”).

From the **collectively objective perspective** these stories and their enactment changed the entire atmosphere among the students and engendered a new understanding of the meaning of the strike. It would express itself in the weeks to come in the students’ treatment of one another.

From this, four dimensions arise for research hypotheses:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Content dimension</th>
<th>Artistic dimension</th>
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<td>Individually subjective perspective</td>
<td>Individually objective perspective</td>
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<th>Ritualistic dimension</th>
<th>Social dimension</th>
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<tr>
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These dimensions can be formulated as simple questions: What does playback theatre achieve or how does it 'work' from the perspective of the storyteller? (upper left) What does playback theatre 'achieve' or how does it 'work' in regard to the ritual interaction between the storyteller, conductor, players and audience? (lower left) What makes a performance artistically effective? (upper right) What effect does playback theatre have on the audience, the performing company (i.e. the troupe of players, musician, and conductor) and on the social context in which it is embedded? (lower right)

The difficulty in adequately describing such a complicated event as playback theatre, or even in examining its 'effectiveness', becomes immediately apparent, because the 'effectiveness' cannot be generally determined. Rather each dimension must be judged by its own criteria. Which criteria of effectiveness should count as valid in regard to the storyteller; to the interaction between the storyteller, conductor, players, and audience; to the theatre troupe; and to the social context, and so forth?
In addition, none of these dimensions can be discussed in isolation without mentioning their relationship to the other dimensions. To be precise, it is not about the effects of single variables, but rather about their common intersection—i.e., the interaction between different effects—content and ritual, ritual and artistry, artistry and social interaction.

Once again, let us review the four questions:

What does playback theatre achieve and how does it work from the perspective of the storyteller? In my opinion, this question can only be examined based on criteria such as subjective sincerity, congruence, and authenticity. The aim is to recognize the personal meaning of the story, to discover its overt (conscious) and covert (unconscious) themes and possibly, by portraying it on stage, to broaden the meaning of the story for the teller. The only valid statement from this perspective is an “I-statement,” such as "That’s exactly what I experienced." Drawing on the example presented earlier of the Iranian student teller, "I go out again and will not let myself be oppressed, not in school, not at the university, nor in my private life."

What does playback theatre achieve or how does it 'work' in regard to the ritual interaction between the storyteller, conductor, players, and audience? This question can only be examined based on criteria such as mutually subjective appropriateness and mutual understanding. The aim is to discover the collective meaning of the story for the group, for the community, and in the process to deepen understanding. From this perspective the group can formulate “we-statements,” such as "We are shaped by the same experience," or, "We are affected by a very similar fate." In the example, the last storyteller of the performance posed the question, "What does the strike mean for us? Is it a game or an existential challenge?"

What makes a performance artistically effective? This question (and the fourth) can be relatively objectively examined based on criteria such as precision in representation. The aim is to portray the story and its various aspects for the storyteller, the audience, and the players in an artistically appropriate and sophisticated manner. Based on our example (from the view of the storyteller): "Today I am telling my story for the first time. And those were precisely my feelings."

What effect does playback theatre have on the audience, the company, and the social context in which it is embedded? This question can be described and
determined based on the criteria of the appropriateness within the social context. The aim is to integrate appropriately the individual stories, but also the entire performance, within the given social context, and in so doing to transform this context. (The main responsibility for this task rests with the conductor.) For both the third and fourth question “it-statements” can be formulated: "This performance absolutely hit the mark," or, "This story could only be told and performed in this group and this situation." In our example (in later discussions with the players): "What taboos are at work in the way we treat foreign students that we do not ask them about their experiences and are not interested in their stories? Are we capable of performing their stories on stage?"

The resulting chart of research questions about the effectiveness of playback theatre follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Dimension</th>
<th>Artistic Dimension</th>
<th>Social Dimension</th>
<th>Ritualistic Dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>criterion:</strong> Congruence (authentic interpretation)</td>
<td><strong>criterion:</strong> Staging (appropriate representation)</td>
<td><strong>criterion:</strong> Interaction (systemic fitting together)</td>
<td><strong>criterion:</strong> Understanding (deep cultural hermeneutics)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>question:</strong> How is playback ‘effective’ from the teller’s viewpoint?</td>
<td><strong>question:</strong> What makes a performance effective? Is the portrayal of the story appropriate? Does it correspond to the main theme and various aspects?</td>
<td><strong>question:</strong> What ‘consequences’ does playback theatre have on the social context in which it is embedded? Does the performance on the whole fit the social context? Does it transform the context?</td>
<td><strong>question:</strong> What does playback theatre ‘achieve’ and how does it ‘work’ from the perspective of the interaction between teller, conductor, players and audience? Does the story and its adaptation deepen mutual understanding? How is the ‘connecting thread’ tied in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>aim:</strong> Personal meaningfulness</td>
<td><strong>aim:</strong> Artistic form</td>
<td><strong>aim:</strong> Social integration</td>
<td><strong>aim:</strong> Collective meaningfulness</td>
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In short, it is indisputable for practitioners of playback that playback theatre ‘works’ in various dimensions. However, in order to describe scientifically this effectiveness and to be able to mutually verify it in the context of practical research, we require a way to speak about various perspectives, criteria, and styles. What sorts of benefits in knowledge are hoped for in the practice of playback theatre through such research?

Avenues for Research

The following discussion is explicitly not about a broad presentation of various stage-forms, applications, or special techniques in playback theatre. (Some of these questions are discussed in other contributions to this volume.) Instead, the following reflections are limited to formulating one possible research question of particular interest for playback for each of these four dimensions (as well as their connections to one another). These questions will be examined by means of a hypothesis within each of the various dimensions and/or perspectives and illustrated with examples.

From the individually subjective perspective, playback theatre ‘works’ because the story verbally reported by the storyteller is not just told, but also reembodied through movement, words, dialogue, voice, and music (as well as supported by the entire scene).

If the stories playing a central role in playback theatre were only told or recited and then were talked about, they would not reach this point of immediate recognition, which often takes place in playback. This recognition is often combined with the subjective feeling of being truly understood and receiving a gift through the play. The performance of a written play can also trigger emotion and consternation. This was the goal of the Greek tragedies. However, these seldom resulted in the experience typical for playback theatre, in which one’s own truth is encountered in an encompassing, perhaps even broadened sense.

I suspect that this is the point at which Fox actually connects to the tradition of preliterary theatre. Orally told and spontaneously played stories undermine the separation of thinking and acting to which we are all conditioned by growing up in a civilization of written culture:
The separation of thinking and acting finds a correlation in perception. Writing transforms the sound of oral speech into spatial symbols, which can be visually perceived. This favors the dominance of the visual in the occidental development over all other senses. This cultural hierarchy of bodily senses and their neurophysical processing leads to a behavior of distance, which also makes it psychologically possible to separate the constitution of the individual from its environment. To the extent to which vocal literacy and writing asserted itself as the dominant medium of communication, the culture and humankind, with its psychophysical as well as mental capacities, developed the aforementioned strategies. The western theatre as a part of this culture supported this process.9

Not without reason, this aspect gains great importance in the training of playback troupes. What is practiced is not the dramatic translation of a text from abstract symbols into a literal body, but rather the spontaneous expression of unconsciously stored moving images.

The manner in which the conductor opens and leads the interview is decisive for an authentic interpretation of the story. In the process, the conductor aims to make the essence of the story clear for both the players and the audience. Most importantly the storyteller must be able to recognize his or her own themes in the artistically condensed version. Many general questions can be asked at this point, about such matters as the meaning of language and the personality of the storyteller.

A specific question for research could be, According to which “rules” should the interview be conducted? Or to what extent does the interview in playback theatre differ from other therapeutic, biographical, or journalistic forms of interviewing?

From the collectively subjective perspective playback theatre 'works' because the storytelling is not limited to a personal meaning, but rather creates a collective meaning of a contingent reality.10 The personal meaning of the story lies in the dialectical crossing over of the individual stories that are told with those that remain untold. Almost always, the stories answer each other in a highly complex form.

Example: Towards the end of a twelve-day experiential training session, two groups were formed, each of which prepared a performance for the other. In the morning performance by the first group, the storytellers came from the second group. The
four stories dealt with the following themes: Where do I root myself? What must I leave behind? Which life do I choose? What have I lost, personally, culturally, and politically? What else is there? What new freedoms have I gained? What is the price of this freedom?

In the afternoon performance by the second group, the storytellers came from the first group. Their three stories focused on, What can I (trust myself to) handle? How do I deal with unforeseen challenges? How do I take the difficult first step? How can I be, and remain, ready to do the right thing at the right time in order not to be overrun?

Not only did the first story in the morning (saying goodbye to a loved city) correspond to the last in the afternoon (saying goodbye to a loved relationship). In addition, on the group level, the themes of the stories and experiences in the afternoon reflected those they had played and/or conducted in the morning, such as dealing with new challenges.

One day later, the final story of the workshop was told and enacted—a dream about career prospects and recognition from authorities. The story was played twice, first as it was dreamt and thereafter as what the storyteller hoped for (the transformed version). His last comment was: "What is important for me is to see that in the second version, I was given the responsibility and had the freedom to do what I wanted." This last workshop story provided an answer to the entire group process as well as to individual stories from individual storytellers.

The sociologist and philosopher Hannah Arendt writes in her portrait of raconteuse Isak Dinesen: "It is true that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it, that it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are, and that we may even trust it to contain eventually by implication that last word which we expect from the 'day of judgement'." Therefore, on an unconscious level, stories can be linked via a connecting thread. They can even transform one another. In this manner the beginning and end of a performance are often connected. A number of spatial and social rituals that are practiced in playback theatre, such as “Let’s watch,” serve to bring all participants into a less consciously controlled, while at the same time broadened, state of awareness.

However, without this ritualized framework—of a beginning and end of a
performance, of the invitation and the bidding farewell to the storyteller after the portrayal of the story—this connecting thread cannot develop. Instead the risk arises that the performance may decline into general confusion. As a principle gained through experience, one can assume that the players perform more creatively and freely, as they feel secure and supported in the ritual created by the conductor throughout the performance. Thus, the research question arises: How does the ritual in playback theatre differ from the rituals of other forms of theatre and other rituals in cults, religions, and political contexts?

From the individually objective perspective, playback theatre ‘works’ when the players successfully integrate the conscious and unconscious, individual and collective, main and sub-themes of a story and convert them into appropriate and artistic moving ‘images’.

As practitioners of playback theatre know, this capacity is based on a spontaneity related to a shamanic state of awareness and only developed after years of training. This difficult-to-describe state of awareness emerges from the interplay between excitement and inner emptiness, in the sense of empty vessel, which makes a particular kind of artistic spontaneity possible.

Fox writes on this subject:

Spontaneity first requires that the senses be open to information from the environment. To accomplish this receptor task, we must be in the moment, animal-like. Second, we must be able to stand outside the moment to make sense of what is occurring. We can then take action—that is, perform a conscious act—which is no small achievement. This action will in turn create a new environmental condition. Thus, spontaneity is the ability to maintain a free-flowing constantly self-adjusting cycle of sensory input, evaluation, and action.12

This state of consciousness, also known as the “middle modus of awareness,”13 is, as far as I know, the subject of little scientific research. However, it is characteristic for all kinds of artists. Apparently, this state arises from a melding of partly individual and partly archetypal-collective “images” on two levels—from basic feelings and basic archetypal pictures. Very clearly this is not about the conscious translation of semantic meaning into symbolic forms of expression, but rather about a kind of creative emptiness (or trance consciousness), which similar to dreams, is rooted in
a deeper level of the systematic nature of the human mind.\textsuperscript{14}

The following research questions arise, among others: \textit{How can this state of consciousness be more closely described? How does it differ from other forms of artistic spontaneity? How can the essence of a story be grasped and expressed? How can the untold and yet tangible elements of a story, the invisible half, be portrayed? What forms are appropriate?}

\textit{From the collectively objective perspective, playback theatre 'works' through a 'connecting pattern' between the story, the portrayal, and the social context of the performance, which is more in keeping with a yogic culture than western customs.}\textsuperscript{15}

In occidental theatre performances the context plays a minor role, beginning with who buys a ticket. Nevertheless the performance itself is usually not affected by this context.\textsuperscript{16} From the beginnings of playback theatre, there lay a new connection between spontaneity and service to the community. I presume that this concept has something to do with Fox’s experience as a member of the American Peace Corp in Nepal. The Western theatre lies in a tradition that was greatly influenced by morality and enlightenment. Nevertheless, modern theatre directors, in contrast to the conductor of a playback performance, do not view “service to the community” as part of their work. Whether or not the “pattern that connects” develops at all is largely dependent on the sensitivity and artistic skills of the conductor. This is less about “creating” the context than expressing the trust that everything necessary for a good performance is there; that this performance here-and-now is unique and can never be repeated; that the direction is open-ended. The real and the spiritual space in which the conductor, storyteller, players, and audience find themselves does not separate them, but rather connects them. This is increasingly the case—the more successfully a performance gives room to different positions and perspectives, creating new relations among the participants. This is no doubt enhanced when players represent different ages and life experiences.

Whether or not this connecting indeed happens is not subject to some quasi-natural law, but rather is an event arising out of the voluntary decision of all. Nevertheless it is not automatic.\textsuperscript{17}

Out of this research questions arise, including: \textit{What are the conditions which support this happening? Why and how is it sometimes successful and other times}
not? In which contexts—professional, educational, and political—is playback theatre possible? To what extent is a performance influenced by such a context? Could and should the context be explicitly referred to, perhaps even brought on stage? Can playback theatre deepen the relationships within a community, or perhaps even create a new community? In particular, is playback theatre a “technique” that is applicable independent of context, or does its effectiveness elude any attempt to implement it towards a particular aim? What kind of experience is gained through the interplay of the various dimensions in playback theatre—content, ritual, artistic form, and social interaction?

Mystery and Play

Depending on the fundamental meta-theory various answers are possible. From the perspective of depth psychology, Laurens van der Post writes, in the tradition of C.G. Jung:

There is... a kind of experience, in which recognition lies simultaneously above and below the level of consciousness. There is a way through which the collective knowledge of humanity expresses itself individually in mere daily life so that life itself becomes pure knowledge. In any event, for me this is life: a mystery in every form of its being, a restless, perfect mystery.”

However, can the mystery of life be researched?

From the perspective of social science, this question of practical intention can only be clarified through a pluralistic discourse about various worlds, which as human beings we belong to simultaneously and for periods of time: the material world of objectivity, the social world of shared subjectivity, and the personal world of subjectivity.

Adjoining Habermas’s theory of communicative action, playback theatre can be understood as a form of communicative, “educative” theatre, which renders an authentic, public sphere for critical discourse, in which storytelling and aesthetic forms of knowledge find a new space. Here, instead of dependence on experts, the daily experiences and stories of members of a community are heard and respected, and the creativity and emancipated potential buried by our schools and universities
can be rediscovered and revitalized.¹⁹

The well-known Bohemian Bishop Johann Amos Comenius, precursor and forerunner to education of the enlightenment period, made a suggestion in his widely forgotten *Schola Ludus* [School as Play]. He wrote to the schoolmaster at the founding of a “praiseworthy school in Patak” in the year 1654:

Finally, people’s lives (particularly those who will serve in churches, governments and schools, and those are the kinds of people that schools take on to educate) thrive on speaking and acting—in this manner the youth will be led through example and emulation without complaint or waste of time to respect the differences in backgrounds and the differences depending on the given situation; to take on the appropriate gesticulation and composure, with the face, hands and entire body; to express the feelings of the moment; to change the voice and to switch with a word; to play each role with respect; and with all this to free oneself from an almost peasant-like awkwardness.²⁰

What Comenius recommended for the individual and societal education of future theologians, educators and legal representatives—acting in school and school as play—is fundamentally valid for our day. For both the players and the audience, there hardly exists a more effective and entertaining framework for examining individual and collective relations as this structure of a “mirror-theatre” ²¹ resurrected to a public stage.

Comenius wanted to employ theatre in school in order to prepare future civil servants (in the church, government, and education) for their work in a still widely class-structured society.²² In contrast, modern playback theatre creates a ritual framework in which an open society can confront itself with its own multifaceted reflection. Viewed as such, the above outline of questions formulated for researching the practice of playback theatre could develop a new focus for critical research in social science and the study of education.

Notes
Translated from German by the author.

Laurens van der Post, *Das dunkle Auge Afrikas* (Berlin: Henssel, 1956), 85f.


Currently in Germany, various institutions are considering implementing trial programs in technical colleges, teaching colleges, and universities in Hannover, Freiburg and Kassel.

"How does playback theatre work?" is an Anglo-Saxon formulation of the problem; the Teutonic formulation would be, "Upon what epistemology does playback base itself?" The Japanese would presumably ask, "Who were the teachers of Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas?" Compare to Johan Galtung, "Structure, culture and intellectual style: an essay comparing Saxon, Teutonic, Gallic and Nipponic approaches," in *Social Science Information* (London and Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), 817-856.

I am fully aware that the following argument is based on a social science research paradigm that is familiar to me and therefore close at hand. There are certainly other just as valid approaches to speaking about the effectiveness of playback theatre. When in the following paper the term effectiveness, or something similar, is used, in no way is a linear cause-and-effect correlation meant.


"Stories are told and every story has a beginning and end. The telling of stories 'reconciles' with reality not only like understanding, in which the contingent reality is lent meaning, but rather through the simple fact that there is a set end, it provides that the principle of a beginning is made conscious." See Ursula Ludz's introduction to Hannah Arendt, *Ich will verstehen* (Munich Piper, 1996), 23.


"The self is spontaneous, in the middle modus... rather the unity before and after the separation of activity and passivity, which includes both." See Frederick S. Perls, Ralph Hefferline & Paul Goodman, eds., *Gestalt-Therapy* (New York: Academic Press, 1951), 164.


Yogic culture does not know the strict separation between presence, past, and future, art and science, theatre and life, audience and players, as is common in the West.

Gregory Bateson writes about this, "As I see it, the world consists out of a complex network... The reward of such work is not power, but rather beauty." (Bateson, *Ecology of Mind*, 268-269).

Naturally, this is not valid for the wide tradition of politically active theatre of this century from Bertolt Brecht to Augusto Boal and Dario Fo, who for their part drew from the old forms of Commedia dell’Arte.

Because of this, social scientists performing practical research can only utilize forms of participants' observations.

See Anne Berkeley, “Forming Critical Spaces: Habermas, Theatre Pedagogy, and the Public Sphere,” unpublished article, Department of Theatre, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, n.d.

Johann Amos Comenius, "*Schola Ludus d.i. Die Schule als Spiel,*" in H. Beyers, *Bibliothek paedagogischer Klassiker* (Langensalza, 1888), 4f.

The playback theatre group led by Marlies Arping and Daniel Feldhendler in Frankfurt/Main call themselves “Spiegelbühne Frankfurt” or “Mirror-stage Frankfurt.”

Civil servants of churches, schools, and legal representatives of the past are now joined by therapists as the guarantors of the societal order. Are they fascinated by playback theatre because it allows role switching on stage in Comenius’s sense of education?