



Gathering Voices Essays on Playback Theatre

A Ritual for Our Time
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Every playback theatre actor is familiar with the disconcerting experience that often comes just when a performance is over. An audience member will come up, shake your hand warmly as if in congratulation, and say: “But tell me. What is the purpose of it anyway?”

We groan inwardly, because to answer such a philosophical question when we are still vibrating from the last teller’s story is pretty tough. Unfortunately, even in calm moments, far away from the stage lights and applause, it’s not much easier.

For in fact the playback process is not simple to describe or understand. One reason is its flexibility: it can be adapted to many different specific needs in education and mental health as well as function as artistic theatre. This means that as a method it spans the conventional categories of theatre, psychology, and education.

Nevertheless, the question is valid: What *is* the purpose of playback theatre?

In this essay, I will attempt to frame an answer. I will discuss the theme first from the point of view of the community—that is, the groups which experience playback theatre, either in ticketed performances or a special setting (such as school, workplace, or community center). Then I will turn to the playback performers themselves and some of the challenges they face in fulfilling the promise of their form.

Red Threads

I’d like to begin with some stories.

The teller, a woman in her twenties, tells about being on a trek in Asia and getting lost. She and her friend were far from a village. Darkness was falling, and no one came to help. The setting was strange and scary. There was nothing to do but camp out in a

kind of shepherd's hut. The teller felt miserable at their bad luck. But nothing bad happened. In fact, they woke up to find themselves in an incredibly beautiful spot, surrounded by rhododendrons, with snow-capped mountains in the distance. Terror had turned into joy; threat into blessing.

The story that followed right after took place in New York City.

A middle-aged woman tells about meeting the daughter of an acquaintance of her mother's, a woman from overseas—a country in Asia, to be exact. The teller (who used to live in New York, but had moved away) had expected to have to show the visitor around. She feared it would be a troublesome and perhaps boring afternoon. As it turned out, the young woman was not only kind and interesting, but also very knowledgeable about the city. In fact, as the day progressed the teller realized that the young woman was showing her around. Instead of being the leader, she was being led; instead of the giver, she was being given to. It was a pleasant surprise.

Let me point out some features of this storytelling process. These two stories form a kind of point and counterpoint for each other. While they both share a theme of unexpected happiness, in the first there is no guide, or bringer of joy, while in the second there is such a figure in the presence of the young woman. The counterpoint creates a kind of dialogue. It is as if in the first story the teller is saying, "Sometimes we are lost and alone, and it turns out all right." And the second teller answers, "That may be true, yes. And it is also true that sometimes, even when we are *not* lost and alone, we can have a surprise and find ourselves guided by a stranger, finding new pleasure in old territory."

It is important to remind ourselves here that in this example the process of the tellers coming forward was spontaneous; the conductor did not invite one kind of story or another. Yet even though each teller told her own personal tale, the stories connected on a social level. This "red thread" can be understood as containing a kind of folk wisdom.

Another feature of this process is that inevitably, there is not one thread, but many. For instance, the first teller has an epiphany in a remote spot in Asia; while in the second

story, Asia, in the form of the young immigrant, comes to the West (“You don’t have to go to the other side of the world”). In the first story, joy follows fear, disappointment, and despair, while in the second, there is nothing so dramatic (“Even a boring obligation can turn into something unexpectedly wonderful.”) In the first story, the teller is a young adult, while in the second story, the teller is old enough to be the mother of the first, (“Adventure is for youth, to be sure, but even when you are my age, such joy can still be found”). In playback these “messages” are communicated through the medium of enacted story, through movement, color, music, and metaphoric action.

A third feature derives from the context. We have learned that the story elements, in addition to speaking to the community in a general way, usually relate very specifically to the circumstances of the group. In this case, the audience comprised students at the start of a long training workshop. It is natural at such a time for students to be fearful of getting overwhelmed and “lost.” Others often worry that the course might be dull and unchallenging. In this case, the course was a PT training, and both tellers, each in her way, seemed to be reminding their peers to trust in the spontaneity process.

The way the red threads carry through a playback event is so rich that as conductor I like to let the process be as undirected as possible, worried that if I make too many suggestions, I will in fact restrict this often unconscious form of dialogue (there are special cases where I act otherwise—see section below on Shamanic Conducting).

Now let me go to a second event, which took place during a playback theatre workshop in the USA on Social Change. There were twelve participants, 10 whites and 2 African-Americans. During the first two days the stories were about white children experiencing the reality of living in a racially divided land.

In one, the teller at age five witnesses prejudice for the first time as she sees her aunt speak insultingly to a beloved servant. In another, the teller tells about being a teenager as the family moves to the suburbs to get away from the blacks.

Following these stories, with the encouragement of the leader, one of the African-Americans tells.

It is a story about his grandfather, in whose house he had grown up—in particular, his grandfather’s personal dignity and high standards for his family. There is a strong incident of racism in the story, in the form of grave injustice suffered by the grandfather at work. But there is a stronger theme of overcoming racism. In fact, the teller never knows what his grandfather suffers until much later, when he learns about it as an adult, because the grandfather had kept it from the children.

In the unfolding of the stories in this workshop, the same contrapuntal elements are present. What stands out here is that with the story of the black teller, we hear from the “other voice.” One of the strongest features of playback theatre is that it allows diverse voices to be heard in a context of empathy.

A final point: the stories told by the whites were not heroic tales, nor were they victim stories. Instead they were accounts involving shameful deeds of their own families, painful to share and to watch. Such honesty enables a confrontation with truth that is all too rare in a human society where countries and their institutions often demand heroic official histories. Playback theatre honors the people’s voice, be it joyful or ashamed, triumphant or oppressed. One of its purposes is to let this voice be heard, before witnesses, in all its richness and variety.

Restoring Oral Traditions

What we have seen so far in these examples is the presence of a special kind of discussion taking place through the tellers’ stories. It is not an ordinary discussion, because it occurs through scenes enacted on a stage. We find more action and fewer words than in ordinary discussion. Moreover, the emphasis is not cognitive. Ideas may be inherent in the stories; we may be able to read a message or moral in them. Often insight will follow the enactment. But ultimately, the playback stories are *stories*, with setting, character, plot, and image. And as in stories, the value, or meaning, often reveals itself only indirectly. For example, in the stories described above, there are points being made not only about racism and prejudice in America, but about adults’ behavior to children and the place of human dignity.

These aspects bring us back in touch with the oral tradition, which is rooted in sensory perception and welcomes emotion. The modern professional world has tended to champion other values. Playback has often been looked upon suspiciously by institutions, because it appears “soft,” and does not focus directly on problems or return concrete solutions. Actually, today, more than two decades after playback first started, there is a more receptive climate to playback’s holistic kind of communication because scholars have been reframing the argument. Sensory interaction with the environment, iconic thinking, need for narrative, and the marriage of feeling and thought are fundamental, it is now believed, to the human mind.¹ Thus playback now can be appreciated for the fullness of its approach to communication, which will often provide the *conditions* necessary to find a truly enduring answer.

Since playback theatre engages many aspects of our intelligence, it penetrates our consciousness in a particularly profound manner. Amazingly, we remember the stories we see in playback theatre. I remember the first story I ever conducted, almost thirty years ago. The teller is a person I see only once in ten years, but the truth contained in her story, which was about getting lost and finding her way, has also remained with me and acts as a kind of ever-present guide as I go about my life.

The concept of discourse implies exchange between equals, and there is an implied belief in playback theatre that if we can speak and listen to each other in this deep way, good will come of it. In a playback performance, we are *all* experts, in that we all have stories with potential answers embodied within them—this holds for the youngest child, the humblest adult, the most wizened elder. The task of the playback leader or team is to create the atmosphere in which the folk feel free to come forth and tell.

Those of us who have been telling, acting out, and witnessing playback stories over a long time know the value of this communal telling. It is one of the reasons, I believe, why there tends to be so little turnover in playback theatre performing companies: the process is life-enhancing on such a deep level that we want to stay involved.

To sum up what we have concluded so far, playback theatre offers a kind of community conversation through stories, and this conversation, even though it contains not one, but

many themes, and is often indirect in making its points, gives scope for the expression of a popular truth.

Awake to the World

Not always, but often enough that we recognize it as normal, the audience feels *good* after playback theatre. Of course, this is true of most theatre as entertainment. But in this case, the feeling is deeper, since the subject of the play is the audience themselves, their life-world. The process of identifying one's own story and witnessing another's often leads to a feeling of communal renewal.

This renewal takes place on a number of levels. The first is individual. I can best illustrate it by noting the changes in a teller's body tension during the enactment of his story. At the start, he will be more or less tense. He may still be searching for the precise thing to tell. He may not quite trust the conductor sitting next to him, asking questions. He may feel shy of the others watching. Once the enactment begins, the body tenses in another way. There is excitement and intense engagement now, as he watches the actors take on the challenge of portraying his life. Then, when the actors hit a chord of truth, capturing the essence of what he was trying, so imperfectly and incompletely, to convey, there is a sudden relaxation, often accompanied by a sigh. Then there is a final body shift, once the enactment is completed, and the teller can take in the empathic response of the audience. The teller returns to his chair in a very different state than when he left it. He is likely to be smiling (sometimes through lingering tears). It is not easy to describe this new state-of-being: He is "in touch." He feels "lighter."

The second level is social. The playback experience reduces the sense of alienation often felt by the inhabitants of the modern community. Of course, playback now exists in a variety of places, from large cities to small towns, and in many different cultures. But despite this variety, it can be generally said that more often than not in a public setting the audience comes as strangers to one another. Thus there is always a tension in the audience as well as among prospective tellers, since there is no way of knowing what

the play will be about or how it will be handled. Members of the audience are naturally wary. This wariness will be present even among a group that is already established, such as a school class or a group of fellow workers. The social interaction that is such an important part of the playback experience works to dispel the fear of being among strangers, planting in its stead a sense of connectedness. Audience members often are amazed that they are able to participate in a personal and meaningful experience with people who only hours ago felt so distant. Their aloofness is transmuted into a correspondingly strong openness to discourse, and even afterwards, as they exchange comments, often a joyful feeling.²

Finally, the very sensuousness of live theatre, with its sights and sounds, images and rhythms, helps bring us out of our shell and open us up to the physical world around us. For those of us living in cities and caught up in cerebral matters, the playback experience constitutes a wake-up for our senses.

Taking into consideration these mood effects on the individual, social, and environmental level, we can say that overall, playback theatre focuses the individual and group energy in such a way that the audience undergoes a trance experience, often feeling both energized and relaxed afterwards, along with a sense of physical and psychological renewal. We come away from the performance awake and open to the world. This effect is not unlike what people have experienced since time immemorial after special communal ceremonies. After playback theatre we can hear once more the leaves making music in the trees; see again the sunlight dancing on the water; enjoy pleasurable and supportive contact with others; find new hope.³

On the Threshold of the New

One can easily imagine other kinds of discourse-enhancing activities, such as a public debate, classroom discussion, or even a therapy session. And one can easily bring to mind other kinds of relaxing, enlivening experience, such as a yoga class, ballroom dancing, or a walk in the forest. What is not so common, perhaps, is an experience that

accomplishes both. What makes this possible in playback is its nature as a heightened dramatic event.

By comparison, we might think of a wedding or a funeral in our times. Or communal dances in other times that had the purpose of preparing hunters for the hunt, or healers to lay hands on the sick. These kinds of rituals are utterly serious and intended to produce transformation.⁴

It is commonplace to say that our modern age has seen a decline in ritual, such that many people today hardly know its power. Thus playback theatre is often asked to perform a more limited task, such as to teach shy adolescents expressiveness, or company managers team-building techniques. And it can accomplish these objectives, but in my view only in the framework of the more profound goal associated with a ritual.

The playback theatre event frequently begins with flatness. The audience, unfamiliar with the form and its ritual process, waits suspiciously. But slowly, as the ritual unfolds and people get caught up in it, feelings rise, with the inevitable consequence that a fully undertaken playback event will be strongly emotional. The music will play a haunting refrain. The actors will render a scene with particular power. The conductor will use just the right word at the right time. And suddenly a teller will spring out of her chair, to tell a story that comes from a buried corner of her soul. And this story will spring another teller into a deep nexus of feeling and memory. This letting loose of emotional energy is a natural part of the ritual.

Sometimes the informality of the playback theatre stage, in which actors are present as themselves, often relating to the audience between stories in a human way, is deceptive. Moreover, playback can take place anywhere, in rooms belonging to everyday life, with virtually no equipment. But there is nothing informal about the ritual.

Not long ago in Israel, I conducted a demonstration of playback in a university classroom for community workers. The conditions were not stable—people came and went; there was little sense of decorum in the crowded classroom space. Nevertheless, I proceeded. Space was cleared for a stage; at its rear was put a row of chairs for audience actors. To the right of the stage I placed two chairs, for myself as conductor

and the teller, who would come from the group. In short, the ritual space was set. In my manner, I tried to give a sense of the temporal aspect of ritual as well: at a certain point, my words became more formal, their pace slow and rhythmic.

The first teller told an everyday tale of waking up in the morning. Volunteers from the audience acted it out. Then a second teller came forward and told a life-threatening secret of twenty years. The secret was that he had been a political radical in another country and had committed violent, illegal acts against an unlawful, repressive regime. The public revelation of this secret at this particular time in Israel's troubled history, when violent terrorism had just been the cause of innocent death, was in itself potentially explosive. The teller, in choosing to tell the story, traversed a boundary of normal acceptance and even safety, in the evident hope that the ritual frame would provide a context for understanding. As conductor I did not hesitate to follow through with the enactment of the scene, even though it involved killing. Held by the ritual, actors from the audience enacted this difficult tale as fully as they had the first. This willingness alone was a sign of deep interpersonal acceptance of the teller. Inevitably, there was a flood of response after the enactment; the ritual holding was even more important after the story than before. We enacted many fluid sculptures to express the different reactions of the witnesses. The result was a charged atmosphere. The outcome might well have been chaotic, but the order held—individuals with very diverse perspectives were able, in the playback ritual, to listen to one another. Social discourse took place on a profound level, and the teller for the first time since he had fled to Israel, could stand openly before his neighbors.

Anthropologist Victor Turner uses the word “liminal” to describe how participants in a ritual go to the threshold of normality—and then beyond. His studies in Africa led him to his concept of “social drama,” in which community problems are dealt with through ecstatic ceremony. Thus for Turner, rituals, with their departure from everyday order, can create a field for creativity, in which the collective can leap beyond, as it were, what had been possible before. This is what happened in the Israel example. The teller crossed a threshold of disclosure, and carried his listeners with him in the process, such

that the audience could regard the pressing social issue of terrorist violence from a fresh perspective, that of the terrorist himself.

This inherent power of the PT ritual is why, despite its flexibility, playback theatre does not always fit into the narrow confines of commissioning organizations, who want to be sure the show is “light,” or focuses on team-building, or who want to avoid certain topics. It is also why playback theatre groups can fail—from their own insufficient grasp of heightened dramatic events. It takes a long time to grow into the role of leading playback rituals.

Rituals of transformation, with their climate of bursting possibility, are not risk-free. If the representative of a potential client group grasps the idea of dramatic ritual inherent in playback, she will naturally want an assurance that those leading the ritual have the necessary knowledge to conduct it properly. This is only appropriate.

Often, however, an institutional representative’s hesitation comes from a fear of feelings, from the very idea of a heightened event taking place. Then the problem lies with the representative, her institution, and even the society at large, but not, I believe, with the playback actors. Indeed playback theatre will succeed in teaching specific outcomes, such as young people to express themselves more freely or managers to work better together, when the dramatic ritual is allowed to flower fully. In such a case, there may be other far-reaching benefits for the group as well.

Widespread lack of understanding about rituals and their usefulness means that the most crucial part of a playback event often takes place long beforehand, in the planning discussions. Host organizations need to be clear that playback creates a ritual that will stir feelings and respond to problems only indirectly; that everyone present will have an equal voice; and that there is a great potential for creative breakthroughs in these rituals.

More and more institutions are calling on playback theatre to conduct rituals, especially at moments of transition. Examples of such occasions are orientation sessions (beginnings) and retirements (terminations). Playback theatre groups are also called upon at times of crisis, when the need for a strong method as well as a strong container

is clear. And playback teams are often called on to perform for a particular group at regular intervals. Thus students in their first week of nursing school could share through PT their feelings about the start of their training, including stories about what inspired them towards nursing. A university faculty department that was being discontinued invited playback to their final party. A married couple in crisis is invited to share their stories in playback, offering each a new way to see the other's perspective. The monthly playback performances, open to all, that are performed by so many companies throughout the world provide a regular place for individuals in their communities to share moments of their lives in an ongoing way. These and many other examples attest to playback's effectiveness in providing groups with a positive way to learn from the past and look to the future.

The Playback Performer's Triad

Let us now turn to the playback practitioners themselves. Jo Salas, in "What Is 'Good' Playback Theatre?" (see chapter one), emphasizes that playback theatre is art and shares the task of all art, which is to convey meaning through coherent design, integrity of form, originality, and skill in execution. In this spirit, many playback companies work hard on staging, dynamics, use of metaphor, improvisation, and mastery of the basic PT dramatic forms in order to fulfill their artistic task of creating form for the meaning in a teller's story.

But art alone is not enough. Playback theatre is also an interactive social event, Jo argues, in which much time is spent focusing away from the stage (greeting the audience, introducing the performance, eliciting feelings, invoking stories, interviewing the teller, and so forth). Managing an interactive social event requires a wholly different set of skills. These include good planning and organization, providing the right physical environment, giving those present a chance to be heard, and creating an atmosphere of respect.

“Good” playback must fulfill the criteria of success in both these realms. Jo concludes that “good” playback resides in a zone where these elements become indistinguishable from one another.⁵ To me this is an important formulation.

Typically playback theatre groups lean towards one side or another. Either they come primarily from an artistic background and are interested in theatrical performing, or they come primarily from a mental health or educational background and are interested more in what we might call the workshop. The former camp has more expressive skills, the latter more group process skills. Sometimes, they even look critically at each other. The “artists” are impatient with process concerns; the “therapists” are disdainful of theatrical elements. Such taking of sides misses the point. All playback practitioners need to develop capacities in *both* domains, no matter what their special interest or emphasis.

If what I have been describing above is true, however, there is a third aspect that is no less important than art and social interaction in creating good playback—ritual. Creating ritual demands different skills yet again: the invocation of a transpersonal dimension, an adherence to rules of conduct; building ecstatic emotional energy; the sparse, rhythmical, highly specialized use of language; and a goal of transformation. To lead the ritual properly, actors focus on their presence on stage. They carefully practice the manner of their listening to the story, setting up a scene, and giving the acknowledgment afterwards. The conductor learns to keep the ritual moving forward, no matter what kind of teller or story; be a guardian of truth (finding the “deep story”), and knowing just when the rules of playback conduct should be adhered to and when they should be relaxed (see table 1).

Thus a good playback actor and leader must be skilled in a triad of roles—as an artist, a host, and a shaman.

This is no light task. It is why serious playback practitioners spend years in apprenticeship and learning.

There are numerous areas where the requirements of these domains seem to place opposite demands on the actors. The art of PT allows aesthetic distance, while the ritual demands involvement. The socially interactive aspect allows for a relaxed, informal

contact, while the ritual demands transpersonal intensity. It is an objective of the artist to entertain and delight the audience; the host to establish trust and put people at their ease; and the shaman to engender an atmosphere of enchantment and even confusion as a stepping stone to entering what has been called the “other thought.”

So how do you plan your opening? Something funny and/or dramatic (artistic)? A clear explanation of what will happen, followed by introductions all around (socially interactive)? Or a slow rhythmical talk, with musical accompaniment, that may not even seem to make much sense (shamanistic)? Clearly, the playback practitioner needs not only to have skills in each domain, but also to be able to blend paradoxical elements effectively. Often, in fact, an opening, while it may lean to one side or another, will accomplish objectives in each of the domains.

If we think of ritual as being a part of this triad upon which the playback experience is based, then there follow certain considerations for the practitioner. I would like to mention some of them here.

First, even though the playback process is spontaneous, the ritual has its rules: The teller must come to the chair; the teller must stay in the chair during the enactment; the teller must tell a personal story. The actors stand when picked for a role; the actors do not talk during the interview. The conductor does not interrupt the enactment; the conductor checks in with the teller after the enactment; the conductor dismisses the teller from the chair. These are *some* of them.

Without the clear framework provided by the rules, spontaneity can quickly turn into chaos, creativity to confusion. With it, the members of the audience feel safe enough to let themselves go into trance, allowing unforeseen breakthroughs.

The need for ritual in playback goes beyond differences between kinds of PT groups, be they professional performing or intimate living room groups. It goes beyond differences in audience size: as much attention must be paid to these formalities with a group of four (teller, conductor, actor, and witness) as with a group of four hundred.

Because of their intensity, rituals place a heavy personal demand on their shamans, and it is essential to take time beforehand to assume the role and afterwards to release

it. “Artistic” PT groups sometimes err in modeling themselves on the professional theatre, arriving in time to do a minimum amount of theatrical warming-up and departing as soon as the show is over; while the process-oriented groups sometimes err in trying to give feedback right away and “discuss” the event. Rituals, however, require a specific kind of warm-up and cool down. After being a conductor in playback, for example, it sometimes takes me more than twenty-four hours to return to what I would consider a normal state. And this is after I have been in a state of disturbance for up to two days beforehand.

The idea of playback as service has its locus in this ritual function. Although the artist and the shaman share certain qualities—both are often “called” to their work, for example—there is a fundamental difference. The artist’s paramount concern is the creation of his or her art, demanding an ultimate loyalty to personal vision, while the shaman’s focus resides in others. In a playback performance, when these roles are in apparent conflict—for instance when the artistic integrity of a show is threatened by a disabled teller whose manner may be slow and halting—there is no doubt in my mind that the shaman role takes precedence. I am not there to look brilliant, or ultimately to create art for art’s sake. Nor are my actors. We are there to conduct a process. It has inspired this person to come forward and tell. It is our responsibility to accept the teller and the story fully and to rise to the challenge of creating an atmosphere of deep attention in the audience. Such situations are common in playback, especially when the ritual is strong, for it is then that the isolated feel safe enough to come forward.

Playback’s grounding in ritual is perhaps a reason why it can flourish in many different cultures, with different artistic and social traditions. The warm-ups may differ throughout the playback world, and the actors may have very different styles, but the ritual is constant. It provides the safety, and paradoxically, the power.

Life and Death Stories

Playback actors of moderate experience sometimes complain about a particular playback event being dull. “The stories weren’t deep,” they say. “They were only anecdotes.” In time, they will hopefully learn to “hear” the archetypal image inherent in

any—even the most mundane-seeming—story. More often than not, however, the sequence of playback stories does contain enough evident seriousness, as well as humor, so that by the end even fledgling actors feel satisfied that indeed, something beneficial has emerged from the void.

Occasionally, however, what we might call a life-and-death story is told, someone's core experience. Then the ritual is most important. At such times the feeling of risk is palpable; there is fear that the teller may "flip out" or that a feeling of chaos may overwhelm everyone.

As an example, I would like to quote from Deborah Pearson, an Australian playback practitioner who has traveled widely. She tells about being guest conductor for a playback performance at a school in Finland when the children had only five minutes before learned about the death of a fellow student in a car accident. If playback is thought of as entertainment, or even as education, one might well argue that this was not the moment for it. Better cancel, and leave the school community to deal as best it can with its shock and grief. If, on the other hand, playback is thought of as a healing ritual, then perhaps it is *just* the moment for it, with one important caveat. It is essential that the company, and especially the conductor, be able to hold the emotions of the crowd and provide a safe place for public mourning.

(Many playback actors know inside themselves that they are not yet ready to contain such strong events, and even if they have the artistic and social interactive skills, they will back away—as they should. And if any of the actors should worry why in their regular performances they are not getting deeper stories from their audiences, it is simply because the audiences sense that the actors are not yet ready to hold them.)

In this particular case, Deborah and her group of Finnish actors, responding to the need for a community healing ritual, did not retreat in the face of community crisis. They went ahead with the performance, ready to enact whatever difficult feelings anyone needed to tell. The young audience responded to the offer of the playback actors. They told about their feelings, and saw them acted out. There were two full stories told and performed. The ritual was accomplished. After the performance, Deborah writes:

I noticed the heads were not hanging down so much as they left the room, and there was more energy. More of them had cried some tears during the performance. More of them were sitting closer to each other. I felt we had come at exactly the right time to look after them so they had more strength to continue with their grieving in the next few days and months to come.⁶

There is another important aspect to this ritual holding function in playback. In the excitement of the spontaneous moment, audience members will fail to follow the “rules.” One will stand up and criticize the story. Another will want to jump onto the stage. A third will come to the teller’s chair and try to manipulate the playback team. At such times the conductor must respond with speed and assurance, knowing when to be permissive and when to be a fierce keeper of the rules. To carry out this task requires not only knowledge and experience, but personal strength and even wisdom.

Shamanic Conducting

One last point: it is important to observe that in order for discourse to take place and liveliness to be enhanced the keepers of the ritual not only need to hold the audience, but sometimes guide it as well. A strong, cohesive group, comprised of autonomous individuals, needs little guidance. They will create just the discourse they need, and find their own sources of liveliness during the course of the event. But in reality, few groups are so enlightened. Problematic individuals are often present, such as the man (it is usually a man) who has *many* comments, *many* feelings, *many* stories to tell.

Sometimes the group as a whole is suffering from a belief or attitude that hinders the unfolding of the ritual experience. For example, they may be afraid of feelings, or they may feel that stories are only valid if they have a happy ending. Finally, it is often prevailing views of the society as a whole that can block the process. An example here might be the reluctance of those who consider themselves in any way isolated from the majority—such as an immigrant, a person of color, a very old person—to step up and tell.

In such situations, the playback performers need to have both courage and cleverness in steering around impediments. For example, in spite of playback's core dictum that "anyone can tell," the conductor needs to *manage* (control) the man who wishes to tell too much, so that there will be space for others. The company needs to use all their artistry and humanity, as high practitioners of improvisational theatre and interactive social events, to charm and disarm any group into being open to feelings. They also need to withstand the need for resolution after a sad or painful story, knowing that inherent in their ritual process is the sure promise of transformation. Most importantly, they need always to keep a sharp nose out for prejudice and injustice, which often reveals itself as much from those who are silent as from the lips of those who speak. The ritual demands as much.

It is a commonplace in playback practice that the conductor and players must be "supportive" to the teller, but this idea of the performers as supportive can be clarified by looking at an example of social prejudice. In order to counteract an atmosphere of politeness, or even acceptance of a prejudiced statement or story from the audience, the team will need to exert a fierce allegiance to the idea of social equality. This will involve supporting those isolated or vulnerable *by being tough* with those who voice a prejudicial view. This does not mean casting aspersions; rather it means insisting on what is necessary to keep the ritual constructive.

At a summertime performance on an American university campus, the conductor made immediate contact with a group of African-American teenagers who had arrived together by asking them who they were. Normally it might be thought of as too forward to single out a specific audience group, but in this case contact was preferable to silence and reinforcement of societal patterns of isolation and alienation ("Those black teenagers might cause trouble, let's just ignore them, what are they doing here, anyway.") When one said they were part of a summer job program, the conductor, in preparation for a fluid sculpture, asked him how it was going. At this point, their counselor/supervisor broke in, saying it was going "Wonderfully." Accepting this response, the conductor passed it on to the actors, and they acted out the counselor's "wonderful." But it was important not to leave it at that, for the adult had answered for the (teenage) child. So

the conductor repeated the question, saying, “Let’s hear from one of the program participants.” The risk here on the artistic level was that the actors would get a second “wonderful,” and the improvisation might begin to feel boring. On the social level the risk was that *none* of the youngsters would want to speak publicly about how they felt.

What actually happened was that one boy did speak up. He said something interesting and full of feeling, which the actors then made into one of the high points of the show. The conductor’s assertiveness paid off, and a prejudice concerning the rights of adults over children was not indulged.

Another example of the shaman as guide took place during the Social Change workshop cited at the beginning of this essay. To recap the situation: there had been two stories told by whites about the role of blacks in their childhood lives, in which the tellers spoke from the perspective of embarrassed witnesses to prejudice. It was a strong theme. Undoubtedly more whites would come forward with stories that would help them assuage their sense of guilt. At this point, however, I intervened, deliberately asking for a story from one of the two blacks. Such intervention runs counter to the basic playback practice, emphasized earlier, of accepting stories from anyone at any time. This was also a request not without risk, for there was a distinct chance that the two singled out might refuse to tell. But the alternative was riskier—repeating an endemic prejudicial pattern of behavior that gave a voice to white citizens, but not blacks. Thus guidance was essential. In the event, an African-American told his story. The discourse continued in a constructive direction, towards the hearing of different voices, and vitality had a chance.

Conclusion

For the second performance of our fledgling playback company, more than two decades ago, we made arrangements to visit the children’s ward of a general hospital. The staff allowed us to come because they often welcomed volunteers of all sorts, and in their eyes we offered simply entertainment for the children. They had no idea of the ritual power of our form (or they might have had second thoughts). We wore clown-like

overalls; we sang a children's song; we were funny and disarming. And yet... since our goal was something more than entertainment, we insisted on performing at visiting hour because we wanted parents to be present. We stuck to our form of inviting individual tellers, even if the bed had to be rolled forward for the child teller to be seen and heard. And we acted out stories—of the children, of the parents, and even the nursing staff. Two memories stand out for me of that day. First, the children told aspects of their experience one sensed they could not tell in ordinary conversation, such as the scary feeling of waiting in a holding room prior to an operation. Second, the experience transformed the atmosphere of the ward: prior to our performance, the children were lethargic and the parents worried behind their comforting smiles. But afterwards, there was eager conversation, and a much lighter mood prevailed that I would even call joyful. It was only our second playback performance, we hardly knew what we were doing, yet one could feel the power of the playback ritual working.

I came to playback theatre from the pursuit of experimental theatre in the period following the Vietnam War. I thought of myself as a theatre artist. In the course of playback's development, I studied psychodrama to learn the group process skills necessary to conduct interactive social events, recognizing how art and social interaction had to be skillfully blended in order to make playback work. Without fully realizing it, I strove during this time to teach my company, my students, and myself the demands of ritual. For it is the ritual component of playback theatre that takes it to our core being, helping us feel newly alive; and it is this ritual component that allows the kind of discourse necessary to transform a dysfunctional or outworn social order.

It happens through our stories. It happens through dance, image, and music. And it happens because of citizen actors who are willing to learn a challenging art on behalf of their communities.

¹ See David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Pantheon, 1996); Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); and Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

² John Stevenson has written about the habit of playback audiences to remain chatting in the hall after a performance, as if they were attending a celebration. See J. Stevenson, "The Fourth Wall and the Third Space," Independent Study Essay, School of Playback Theatre, 1995.

³ For more on this subject see chapter three, Preliterary Drama, in my *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre* (New Paltz, NY: Tusitala Publishing, 1994).

⁴ See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

⁵ See chapter one above, and also Jo Salas, *Improvising Real Life: Personal Story in Playback Theatre* (New Paltz, NY: Tusitala Publishing, 1993).

⁶ From an article by Deborah Pearson to be published as part of a fifth anniversary volume by Terinateatteri Mielikuva, a playback theatre company in Helsinki, Finland. This volume will also include an early version of this essay on ritual.