

# Ethics and the Contract in Playback Theatre

*"Ethical standards cannot tell helpers what to do or why they should  
behave in a certain way. Acting responsibly is an inner quality."*  
**Tennyson & Strom 1986. Journal of Counseling & Development**

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Leadership Essay  
August 2001

*“Always do right, this will gratify some and astonish others”*

**Mark Twain .**

Most professional societies and organizations have a code of ethics. I didn't find any ethical standards or codes connected to any theatrical, dramatic or acting organizations. In the therapeutic professions there are as many codes as there are professional societies. I was not surprised by this. Playback Theatre (PBT) is an artistic, theatrical form that validates emotions and personal stories. PBT is not a professional organization or society.

I have noticed that when some people in my community see us perform playback theatre, they will say that it looks like a form of therapy. Often when I describe PBT to people, they'll say "that sounds like therapy to me, do you have a background in counseling or psychology?" My answer is often, "we do art, and art has the capacity to heal". I'm pretty quick to make the distinction between being an actor and not a therapist. The fear of misrepresenting my skills is perhaps the most frequent ethical question I face in PBT. Am I qualified to do what I am doing? Am I doing something unethical? What standard of values and ethics am I following? Hearing this response moves me to examine how we present PBT. There are no social workers or therapists currently in our company nor do we discuss specifically therapeutic elements in rehearsals or performances. Our emphasis is always in creating an artistic product and honoring the teller's story. I suppose that the reason these people have this response is that they associate sharing personal stories to strangers with therapy and that the gap between art and healing varies from community to community. Mention real life joys and struggles in a public forum and you are quickly referred to a therapist. Is one of the goals or effects of PBT to bridge the gap that our culture and society have created between art and healing, art and therapy?

People will make the associations that come to them. Being identified as a therapeutic form is not so bad, it could be worse. The majority of our audience does get it, but the word "therapy" has been in two recent reviews of our work. The reason I mention this is that no matter how well you wordsmith what it is you do, there will be other perceptions and associations out there, festering. Your company is being linked to professions that have written codes of ethics. Is this a problem? Probably not, but in this current climate of litigation, who can say? Like many PBT companies, we do playback in business, education, private and public settings. To cover any situation that might lead to litigation, we carry an inexpensive liability insurance policy. I may believe that I'm doing "good" playback, but others out there might not agree with me. I can say, "PBT may open issues but you'll need to consult with a therapist because we are actors" but...

So, there are ethical standards imposed from outside the PBT world, standards we hold up to each other, within our PBT companies and within ourselves. An ethic is defined as a principle of right or good conduct and as a system of moral values. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss what is right or good conduct in PBT but rather to look at the process of assessing, improving and communicating ethics, values, standards and contracts within the PBT community.

Does playback need a code of ethics like some of its distant cousins (Psychodrama, drama therapy etc.) have? What does playback need in this regard? Does it need anything?

Part of this exploration will also concern the contract; the contract, agreement or covenant we as playback practitioners have with the community, audiences and individual tellers. Much of how PBT is judged or evaluated by ourselves and others depends on the level of mutual understanding and consistent follow through of the contract. How do we describe; what we do and what we are in the community, our qualifications to do this work, what we expect of the teller and what the teller can expect of us.

I remember an incident that occurred while conducting an impromptu playback performance during a three day psychodrama workshop that I was participating in. We were doing fluid sculptures and I was getting ready to make the transition into stories, when a man raised his hand and began telling a rather deep story. Instead of having him hold his story until I had introduced the audience to doing stories, I persuaded him to come and share his story from the teller's chair. The contract at that point was for the audience to tell moments for fluid sculptures. Regardless of my intention, I broke the contract by tricking the teller into telling a "story" when he was expecting a fluid. When I checked in with him after the enactment, he said the actors did a good job but felt that he was tricked into it and didn't intend to share that much. I'm afraid I inadvertently did more harm than good. Since then, I have tried to be consistent with the contract.

We assume a lot in PST.

Once at a PBT gathering, I had the experience of watching an actor add information in an enactment about a character that was not in the teller's story. The inclusion of the added material changed the tone and meaning of the teller's story. I was very shocked and disturbed by the inclusion of the added material. I waited until the teller and the actors had a chance to process the experience before I told the group of my discomfort with what had taken place. It wasn't meant as an attack on the actor (he and I had become friends at the conference) I but to create a dialogue on what I considered an important issue. Several people were having trouble understanding my point. I was fairly certain that the teller had a similar reaction to mine although she did not mention the added material during processing. When I asked the teller how she felt about that aspect of the enactment, she shared with the group that at that point, she began to care about that other character and it was no longer her story. At this point the discussion became lively and heated but was cut short as the session was ending. As the group was breaking up, several people came up to me to share their views. A man who had

been silent in the discussion, shared that he too was disturbed about the added material and was glad that I brought it up. Several people however, shared with me that they use similar techniques in their playback companies. It is due to the comments of these two people and the possibility that other playback companies are adding material to explain a given characters' actions that I mention this story. In this case, the actor who added the material explained that he did not have a specific agenda but added it as an extension of developing the character. What if the actor or conductor does have an agenda outside of the teller's intent? Sometimes the teller will point out what wasn't accurate but often they don't.

In playback theatre it is important to let the story be the story, not to fix or change the tellers meaning. Sociodrama and Boal's Forum Theatre would be methods of exploring the motivation of this other character as could PBT if that other person were also in the audience to tell his side of the story.

This story has to do with the contract as well. When the teller's story is not accurately played back (as in this case), the contract is breached. PBT is, however, a spontaneous and fallible art form full of imprecision and subjectivity. Ask five audience members whether or not the contract was breached and you may have five different answers. The teller will have a different view, as may the actors and conductor.

*"Even within the broad guidelines of ethical codes, responsible practice implies that professionals base their practice on informed, sound, and responsible judgment. To us, this implies that professionals should consult with colleagues, keep themselves current in their specialties through reading and periodic continuing- education activities, and be willing to engage in an honest and ongoing process of self-examination."*

from Issues and Ethics in the Helping Professions, page 3

There are many ways to train in and study PST. There is a School of Playback Theatre, many papers and books are written about PST, PST practitioners and companies offer

workshops and classes, the IPTN and its Interplay newsletter provides education and support for its members. There is, however, no one standard of education, no consensus in the world of PST as to what is the proper training program. Anyone can hang out their shingle) whether they have been to one workshop or a hundred. There is no governing body or license needed to practice PBT. So it is up to the individual to get a solid base of PBT training and to continue that education in order to become better practitioners and make informed ethical choices. With absolute freedom comes absolute responsibility.

Often it is only the leader of a playback company that has any training. It is the company leader who sets the ethical standards, goals and values for the rest of the group. Beyond finding answers to ethical and moral dilemmas within their own groups, playback practitioners need to have people in place outside of their company to share ideas and questions. Several people have come to me for such help, which is both flattering as well as wonderful because it shows that they are on a journey to become better playbackers. As I listen to them, I am reminded of the beginning of my journey in PST. I let them know that what I am imparting to them came to me by making mistakes, asking myself hard questions and consulting with my mentors. My mentors also have mentors of their own and so on, creating a worldwide network of support. As it is necessary for playback actors to release the ego in order to serve the teller's story, so must committed practitioners seek help, admit that they don't know and find mentors and training to learn more about what they don't know.

*"Experience is of no ethical value. It is merely the name men give to their mistakes."*

Oscar Wilde

I've noticed that there is much ado about mistakes in PST. The Australians seem to revel in them, not to cover them up but to see what unexpected magic they bring. Everything happens for a reason, there are no mistakes some say. Mistakes, in the theatre, are what rehearsals are for.

Ethical mistakes are a bit more serious and often go un-noticed until later, if ever. Mentors, however, are usually not there on stage to help when ethical dilemmas arise. Conducting is a lonely job and conductors must make many difficult choices with very little time to consider the consequences. What's a practitioner to do? I found three quick tests for ethical congruence and a four part model for ethical decision making from the Ethics Resource Center that I feel have relevance in PST.

### **The Self-Test a.k.a The Butterfly Test**

This test concerns your gut reaction. Does a particular choice or action give you "butterflies" in your stomach? This relates to the distinction Jonathan Fox makes between anxiety and fear in Acts of Service. "Anxiety is a valid warning not to do something, while fear is a sign that what one is about to do has value and to go ahead."

### **The Authority Test a.k.a WWJD? (What Would "Jonathan" Do?)**

Feel free to substitute any other mentor here. How would you feel if they were looking over your shoulder as you made a decision. Another version of this is to imagine encouraging a loved one to make the same choice that you are considering.

### **The Public Scrutiny Test a.k.a. What Would the Neighbors Think?**

If your decision and internal debate were published for the entire playback community to read, how would it affect your process?

### **A Four Cell Matrix for Ethical Decisions by Sanford Krolich**

Krolich argues that every ethical decision involves these four components.

**Individualism**-The concern for what will happen to ourselves as the result of the decision we make. This is where one finds hidden agendas.

**Altruism**- The concern for the impact of our decision on others or on our relationships with others. This is where we find concern for what they will say I think, feel or do.

**Idealism**-The concern for how the decision aligns with our beliefs and values. This is where we find concern with whether a decision is right, fair and good.

**Pragmatism**-The concern for the practical consequences of the decision. This is where we find concern for what will happen as a result of the decision. What is the impact of the decision on goals and objectives.

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So, does PBT need a code of ethics? I'm not sure. We certainly need to ask questions of ourselves and each other and to promote an on-going dialogue. As playback interfaces with other disciplines and communities, we need to be aware of where we stand on issues of ethics and the contract.

As playback grows, the control over quality and commitment among practitioners will diminish unless each of us are advocates. When I talk to people who are interested in doing playback or are doing it with little or no training, I often passionately let them know that playback is not to be taken lightly and that it requires training and compassion. Afterwards, I sometimes feel that I might have come on too strong, but I get over it. We need to be passionate about our work.