



Personal Stories in Public Places: An Investigation of Playback Theatre.

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This thesis investigates Playback Theatre, an improvised form in which members of an audience are invited to tell personal stories to a 'conductor' and see these improvised by a company of actors and musicians. As a performing member of Playback Theatre York throughout the duration of this research, I have had the opportunity to record and analyse the processes involved in the improvised enactment of personal stories.

The thesis argues that effective playback performances initiate a process of interpretative or *hermeneutic play*. Through this process the teller's story is destabilised and opened up to multiple perspectives and subject positions, none of which are authoritative or final. It is argued that playback enactments often exemplify the ways in which narratives are constructed out of human experience and, by doing so, highlight their contingency and mutability.

It is proposed that the contrasting means of representation between the 'telling' and the 'enactment', the particular position of the teller on stage, and the tension between the performative and the referential, all heighten the conditions for hermeneutic play.

The method devised to construct this thesis includes the analysis of playback performances, the reflexive use of 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives, the use of writing as a means of discovery, and the employment of multiple subject positions to render the complexity of the field.

Through these means the thesis works to reject the claim, often present in playback discourse, that performers playback the 'essence' of the teller's story. Instead it is proposed that, since the past is irrecoverable and only capable of being signified through the complex mediation of memory and representation, playback theatre shows how the actors, in their unavoidable partiality, *respond* to the story. The thesis concludes by exploring some of the ethical and political issues that are raised by the performance of personal stories in public places.

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Chapter One

Introducing Playback Theatre

In December 1999 Playback Theatre York staged a performance at a centre for people with mental health problems in Halifax. It was the first of a series of performances commissioned by the mental health charity, MIND. The Company had performed at this venue two years previously and knew some of the audience that comprised of about fifty people with mental health problems and professionals who worked with them. The performance took place in a room used by the members of the centre for meeting each other. The chairs were turned around to face a stage area on which there were two chairs downstage right, a line of five chairs on the same level upstage centre and a chair surrounded by musical instruments stage left. An assortment of coloured fabric was hanging on a clotheshorse at the back of the stage.

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As the audience arrived the performers, who were dressed in black T-shirts, black trousers and bare feet, greeted them and introduced themselves. At the cue of music, the actors took their places in front of the five chairs centre stage. They began in the usual way. Each took turns to tell a moment or short story from his or her own life and watch as this was briefly performed by the others. The actors used brief improvisations to playback each story. The musician accompanied them. The stories told that day included: worries about feeling lonely at Christmas; feeling low in energy and wanting to stay in bed that morning; the changing relationship with an actor's mother during her

serious illness; memories of the last performance when an actor's husband was seriously ill; feeling tearful because of having lost her voice and finally, on the journey to Halifax remembering the saying ' Save us from Hell, Hull and Halifax' and then dozing on the train.

A woman, not dressed in the black costume of the performers, stood centre stage and welcomed the audience to a performance of playback theatre. She introduced herself as the conductor and explained that she would be inviting members of the audience to tell their own stories. She began by asking the audience if any thoughts or feelings had arisen from the actors' stories.

Playback theatre is a form of improvised drama in which members of an audience are invited to tell personal stories to a 'conductor' and see these improvised by a company of actors and musicians. In the playback lexicon, the contributor of each autobiographical narrative is called the 'teller'. They are invited to sit on the stage or to recount their experience from the audience. Playback practitioners usually work in companies and perform to a wide range of audiences. Although this performance by Playback Theatre York was given to people with mental health problems and professionals who work with them, the company also perform at conferences, for different professional groups, in health and social care settings and occasionally at events that mark significant life transitions (for example, significant birthdays, weddings, retirements). I have been a member of this company since 1994; my involvement will present significant methodological opportunities and problems that will be discussed in *Chapter 2*.

Playback theatre is relatively under-researched and, although practised in many countries throughout the world, relatively unknown amongst theatre theorists and historians. I will begin by acquainting the reader with a typical playback performance through presenting vignettes from the Halifax show. I shall also begin to ask questions of the form – to expose playback theatre and the process of writing about it, to a destabilising dynamic. To date, the limited literature on playback theatre has tended to have the aim of promulgating and explaining the practice for those who are unfamiliar with it, or it has been written for those ‘insiders’ who practice it and wish to develop their understanding. There is, therefore, little critical writing on playback and I know of no attempt to systematically examine the discourse and practices of its practitioners. This will be one of my central aims in writing this thesis.

Accordingly, in looking at the course of one particular performance and through a somewhat critical examination of playback theatre’s history and discourse, I intend to identify some of issues that are raised by the practice of inviting personal stories to be told in public places.

A ‘typical’ playback theatre performance

It is, I think, noteworthy that the ‘usual format’ of a playback theatre performance is, with some variations, remarkably stable throughout the world. I have attended playback performances in Australia, Japan, the United States and the Netherlands, watched companies from Hungary and Japan perform at the Seventh International Playback Theatre Conference at York, in 1999, as well as talked to, and worked with, practitioners from many other countries and there seems to be remarkable conformity in the structure of a

performance. This relative homogeneity is, almost certainly, partly explained by the small number of international trainers who have introduced playback theatre around the world and by the observation that the form takes certain risks with the audience in asking them to tell their personal stories and, indeed, performers take risks in spontaneously enacting those stories. In light of those risks it is perhaps not surprising that practitioners choose to work within a stable and, for them, easily recognisable format. However what Anne Chesner refers to as the 'simplicity' (2002 p.41) of the playback form is problematic. It suggests homogeneity of practice which potentially may mask diversity and inhibit a flexibility of response to differing social, cultural and environmental conditions. An understanding of how differing 'public places' influence playback performances and so construct varying notions of 'public' and 'personal' is important in grasping the playback process.

Halifax: 2

After the conductor had asked the audience if they had any personal responses to the actors' stories, a woman, who was, perhaps, in her sixties, put her hand up and said that the actor who had spoken about being lonely had evoked thoughts of the imminent Christmas. She spoke about all the pressures to enjoy herself and be 'happy' at Christmas when all she felt was that she was 'crying inside'. The conductor asked for this to be played in 'three voices', a 'short form' in which three actors give contrasting voices to portray elements of the story. These voices are heard separately and then combined and improvised upon. The actors mixed the sound of crying, with a Christmas carol and a groaning sound. Near the end one of the actors

shouted out 'I'm crying inside'. This was picked up and echoed by the other actors.

Following the conductor's 'invocation' playback performances usually begin the performance with what are called 'short forms'. These vary a little from company to company; however, 'fluid sculpts' or 'sculptures' and 'pairs' or 'conflicts' are common throughout. In a 'fluid sculpt' upon hearing a moment or a short story and receiving the standard invitation to act from the conductor in the words 'Let's watch', any one of the actors may move downstage and give a repeated movement with sound or words. One by one, other actors join the developing sculpt. The piece concludes when the first actor freezes. 'Pairs' is used to work with conflicting emotions, wishes or motivations. The actors stand in pairs. Having heard the story, the pair of actors – either back to back and revolving, or facing the front – without consultation play out the two sides of the stated conflict. Many more of these short forms are set out in *Appendix One*.

These short forms are followed by what in Playback Theatre York we call 'full stories', but are sometimes called 'scenes' (Salas 1993 p.31). Jo Salas, a member of the first playback company and the partner of Jonathan Fox, the founder of playback theatre, describes '...the five stages of enacting a story' (Salas 1993 p.33-34). These are the interview, the setting up, the enactment, the acknowledgement and 'bringing it back to the teller'. I will use this structure to present a further vignette from the Halifax performance.

Halifax: 3

Following a number of short forms, the conductor invited the audience to offer stories by coming forward and sitting on a chair onstage right next to him. He told the audience that this was an opportunity to ‘...tell a longer story and have the chance to decide who will play the parts in the story’.

‘The interview’

A woman in her late thirties or early forties came forward. Her story was about ‘...getting my daughter back on Christmas day’. On Christmas Eve she was sitting in the lounge of her house with her new partner, her eight-year-old daughter, her ex-husband and his new partner. They were making ‘small talk’. The daughter was to spend Christmas with her father, the teller’s ex-husband. As the mother and her new partner prepared to leave to go out to a restaurant, her daughter asked if she could go with her instead of her father. It was agreed that the girl would stay with her mother for Christmas. The teller was clearly delighted by this and described it as a wonderful Christmas present.

The conductor asked her to choose an actor to play herself. She chose Viv, calling her ‘the big woman’ – she herself was large – and she chose Greta to be her daughter. Other actors played the uncast parts when required. The conductors said ‘A gift at Christmas, let’s watch.’

The setting up

While the musician (in this case there was one musician but there can be more) played, the actors went to collect fabric from the clotheshorse if

required. They then stood on either side of the stage facing each other. When they were ready the music stopped and one by one they entered the stage to form an initial tableau.

The enactment

The enactment began with this 'still tableau'. The daughter sat on one of the chairs and the ex-husband sat beside her and put his hand on her knee. The mother stood on the other side of the stage. They began to make 'small talk', repeating the words 'small' and 'talk' in different combinations. When it was time for mother and her new partner to leave, the ex-husband took his daughter's hand and spoke to her about what a great Christmas they would have together. They turned their backs on the mother, and were, in effect, facing the teller. As the mother spoke about how much she would miss her daughter, she began to cry. Another uncast actor came across the stage, saying she was a 'fairy godmother' and that she could grant her wishes. The mother asked the fairy godmother for her daughter to be returned to her. As the mother spoke of how she wished her daughter to share Christmas with her, the daughter began to turn towards her mother. The father, for a moment resisted this turn, pulling the daughter away from the mother. However, the daughter continued to move towards her mother; as they met they began to dance, swinging each other across the stage. The audience applauded and cheered in delight.

The acknowledgement

At the conclusion of the enactment the actors and musician turned and looked at the teller. They awaited her response.

Bringing it back to the teller

The conductor then asked the teller to comment upon the enactment. She was crying as she reported that she had liked the way the actors danced together and that it was 'lovely' when all the audience joined in. She seemed to find it difficult to speak further. She returned to her seat to applause led by the performers.

Some Preliminary Questions

A brief discussion of this vignette will sketch out some of the key issues that will be addressed in this thesis. It is not one of the most effective of Playback York's enactments, yet I have chosen it because it reveals some of the complexities of the performer's *response* to the teller's story. The relationships between the actors and the characters in the improvisational encounter cannot be understood as simply a replication of the story. There seems to be much more going on in their response. In this thesis I will investigate the nature, implications and ethics of the performer's response to the teller's experience.

The actors produced a kind of 'Hollywood moment' – a moment in which triumph was written unambivalently upon the narrative. When the mother and daughter danced there was no room for ambivalence, despite all the unanswered questions that lay within the story: Why had the daughter been separated from her mother? Did she stay with her permanently after this reunion? How did the father feel at losing his daughter? Why had the mother lost the daughter in the first place? The power of the narrative of 'triumph' had such strength that we were all willing to suspend the difficult questions.

Who could resist a 'gift of a child story', especially at Christmas? One could ask if the performers were twisting the narrative in order to produce the desired effects in the audience. This raises questions concerning the relationship between the teller's narrative and the enactment. If the performers are not replicating the story what are they doing? In what sense, if at all, can we say, as some playback practitioners do, that the performers are conveying the 'essence' of the teller's narrative?

Another question concerns the nature of autobiographical narrative. Is it possible to assert a direct correspondence between the teller's experience and the narrative told in a performance? Or is it not more the case that that narrative will be inflected by the various contexts of its telling – the stories and enactments that preceded it; processes of identification that are present for the teller during the performance; the dialogue between the teller and the conductor; and the response of the audience during the telling? If it is not possible to assert that correspondence then any supposed linear progression or straightforward translation from experience to recounted narrative is significantly complicated.

This vignette also poses questions about the way in which personal narratives are enacted. Why do playback performers choose to improvise? Is there something about improvising 'in the moment' which makes a significant contribution to the teller's account? Why do they tend to avoid naturalistic portrayals in preference for rather more figurative ones? On what sources do the performers draw in responding to the teller's narrative and how do the different subject positions of the performers inflect the ongoing dramatisation?

Another set of questions surrounds the position of the teller in playback theatre. Their position as a spectator rather than as an actor distinguishes it from other cognate practices such as the theatre of the oppressed, psychodrama and dramatherapy. We need to ask: what are the dramaturgical and ethical implications of the non-involvement of the teller in the enactment? Finally, of course, when personal stories are told in public places, significant ethical issues are raised concerning the exposure of the tellers and the responsibility and accountability of the performers.

This brief rehearsal of some of the questions raised by playback practice gives an indication, albeit sketchy, of the direction of my thesis. It will be necessary to set this out in more detail and with more precision. A consideration of the history of playback will contextualise that discussion and further identify some the issues that need to be addressed.

A history of the development of playback theatre

Jonathan Fox, the founder of playback theatre, described the first playback theatre performance as follows:

It is Sunday afternoon in winter, the early afternoon sky bright despite a cover of cloud. The light pours in through the big windows of the church hall, in the centre of which are placed about thirty chairs facing a line of plastic milk crates. On one side of the crates sits a collection of musical instruments. On the other side brightly coloured cloth hangs from a wooden prop tree. The voices of children resound in the hall as their parents usher them in and help them off with their coats. In a back room I am with my actors. We are facing our first performance with a new company and a new approach called Playback Theatre. It is totally improvisational. Our objective is to act out, using mime, music, and spoken scenes, the personal stories of the audience. (Fox 1994 p.1)

That first playback theatre performance took place in New London, Connecticut in the spring of 1975. The audience were friends and families of

the actors, gathered together for '... improvisational theatre based simply on the real life stories of people in the audience, enacted on the spot by a team of actors' (Salas 1993 p.9).

Later in that year, Jonathan Fox moved, with his partner Jo Salas, to New York State and formed what was to be called the 'original playback theatre company'. They performed in Poughkeepsie, a small town in the Hudson Valley, close to where, in 1936, Jacob Moreno had founded the Beacon Hill Sanatorium and had developed the clinical application of psychodrama.

Nearly a quarter of a century later, in August 1999, Playback Theatre York hosted the Seventh International Playback Theatre Conference to which 265 people from 26 different nations attended. Companies from Australia, Japan, Australia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States, Finland, Germany, France, Holland, Hungary, England and Italy performed in what was, to date, the largest playback theatre conference to be held.

In 1999, Jonathan Fox, as joint editor of the first book of essays on playback theatre wrote: 'I am...the one who first conceived the playback idea' (Fox and Dauber 1999 p.9). Fox was an actor and teacher with a particular interest in the oral tradition of pre-literate societies and a distaste for '...the competitive, sometimes narcissistic aspects of the world of the mainstream theatre' (Salas 1993 p.9). In the early 1970s he had worked for the Peace Corps in Nepal and had been struck by the '...redeeming roles of ritual and storytelling in the pre-industrial village life of rural Nepal' (Salas 1993 p.9).

With his partner, Jo Salas, a musician and therapist, he returned to the United States where he encountered psychodrama and worked with Zerka

Moreno, the widow of the founder of psychodrama, in Beacon, New York.

Clearly inspired by psychodrama and by Moreno's wife, he wrote:

What I heard from her lips, and what I witnessed under her guidance, felt like a revelation. Here was true community theatre. Here was theatre that made a difference. Here was emotion. Here was often stunning beauty. (Fox and Dauber 1999 p.10)

He experimented with improvisation and what he called 'immediate theatre' (Fox and Dauber 1999 p.9), eventually founding a small company called 'It's All Grace' in 1974 (Salas 1993 p.9). The company mainly comprised some of the parents of a small experimental school where he and Jo Salas sent their children. It was this group, which, in 1975, staged the first performance of what later was to be called playback theatre.

Fox describes his 'discovery' of playback theatre as his 'café vision'.

This is elaborated by Jo Salas:

One day, over a cup of hot chocolate in a diner, the idea came to him: an improvisational theatre based simply on the real life stories of people in the audience, enacted on the spot by a team of actors. (Salas 1993 p.9)

We should note the 'cup of hot chocolate in the diner' and query what the writer was trying to convey in this strictly unnecessary elaboration. The everyday and accessible homeliness and innocent child-like beginning that is suggested hints at a particular perspective on playback to which I will return later. The act of uncovering origins inevitably involves the reading and writing of "genesis" stories. These stories often tend to simplify – so in some way we may imagine that, back in the spring of 1975, the founders of playback faced less complexity than is the case at the present time. They often seek to convey qualities of innocence and freshness. This can be detected in the opening paragraph of the account, which refers precisely to the weather

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conditions and 'the light pouring in through the big windows of the church hall'. There is a sense here of bright new mornings and of epiphany. The quasi-religious references are important to note because they suggest a way of conceptualising playback that I want to bring into question in this thesis.

This 'genesis story' is particularly potent when, as is the case of playback theatre, there is a single founder whose life-partner has also been involved from the outset. The existence of this 'original' parental pairing is a powerful formula for myth-making and the formation of charismatic forms of leadership. I have not escaped this transferential dynamic nor has, in many cases, the playback community as a whole. Individual playback companies often operate very independently; however, at international events, where the tensions of a large organisation operate, there sometimes seems to be a tendency to gather around the figure of the 'original father'.

Soon after that first Sunday afternoon performance, Fox and Salas moved to New Paltz in the Hudson Valley where Fox could finish his studies at the Moreno Institute. During that period fellow psychodrama students complemented the nascent playback company. The Moreno Institute contributed to the development of playback theatre not only in providing some of the early actors but also by paying the rent of their rehearsal space for the first two years. The influence of psychodrama has continued to be crucial in the development of playback theatre; for example, the establishment of playback in Europe was made far easier by the significant presence of a psychodrama community in, for example, Germany and Finland. Jonathan Fox continued this connection, editing in 1987 The Essential Moreno, a

collection of Moreno's writings on psychodrama, group method and spontaneity.

The way in which playback theatre acquired its name is illuminating.

Salas writes:

One evening, we sat around the oil-cloth covered dining table at the Moreno Institute, drinking tea and looking for a name for this collective adventure. Names flew around the table, some inspired, some pretentious, some obscure, some witty. We filtered out all but a few, and in true psychodrama fashion, we role-reversed with each one of them. How do you feel, Name, about representing this thing we're doing? There was one name which revealed itself to be the right one: Playback Theatre. (Salas 1993 p.10-11)

The key role of psychodrama is evident in the venue for the discussion and in the playful use of the psychodramatic technique, role-reversal. What is also interesting and potentially enlightening is the reference to 'the oil-cloth covered dining table'. Salas wrote this description of playback's origins in 1993. It was a time when the movement was growing exponentially, the 'Original Company' had disbanded, the work of that company had been passed to The International Playback Theatre Network (IPTN) and playback theatre was being practised in 17 countries around the world (Salas 1993 p.13). It was a time of rapid change in the organisation and this seems to lend some significance to the description of the 'oil-cloth covered dining table'. In common with the earlier reference to 'the café vision' the phrase has a nostalgic yearning to it, a desire for the natural, simple and unadorned.

Although I do not want to overplay the significance of 'the oil-cloth covered dining table', I would suggest it acts as a symbol for one highly influential dynamic in the playback theatre movement – that is say, the rejection of western industrialism and a desire for the communitarianism of

oral, storytelling societies. Playback in its origins and arguably in its ideology is a quasi-rural phenomenon.

Writing in 1999 Heinrich Dauber talks of Fox and Salas's

...search for alternatives to the consumer society of mass-produced goods and services; for a simpler, more 'convivial' community orientated lifestyle. (Dauber 1999 p.70)

However, there is in the playback movement a tension between the desire for original simplicity and a recognition of political realism and hard-headedness. There seems to be a tension between explanations rooted in an essentialist and, at times semi-mystical, discourse and those that draw upon the language of socio-political and cultural explanation. Perhaps most importantly for playback, there is a tension between a centralising impulse, to gather around the figure of the founder and the 'elders' on the one hand, and on the other, a desire for diversity and democratic institutions. I shall trace these tensions as they appear in the playback theatre literature.

The 'Original Company' performed weekly through the late 1970s and early 1980s to a mixture of regular and new audience members. Performances were also given at conferences, to schoolchildren, prisoners, the elderly, people with mental health problems and people with learning disabilities. It was clear from this that the genre was establishing itself as being available for disadvantaged groups and this has been the case throughout its history. It is clear that, from the outset, playback theatre was maintaining the psychodrama tradition from which it had partly emerged, in having a clear intention to explore the efficacious and restorative potential of the theatre form. Fox described in 2000 that the 'original playback vision' was

to '...recapture that kind of ceremonial enactment in which there is no distinction between art and healing.' (Fox 2000 p.14)

Fox describes the development of playback's dramaturgy within the original company:

Our mission was to find effective dramatic forms for the enactment of any and all personal stories. We tried many different ways, some dance-like, others clowny, others psychodramatic. Over time we learned that our form demanded its own aesthetic. Some of our experiments suited the Playback approach and became part of our dramatic tradition, while others, after a hot period of discovery, turned out to be less effective and were eventually dropped. (Fox 1994 p.3-4)

Of course since then there have been innovations and developments to playback's dramaturgy. For example 'The Theatre of Spontaneity International' (founded in April 1990), an international group of playback theatre performers, developed some new forms, which are still used by Playback Theatre York. The short form, 'Three Voices', mentioned earlier is an example of this.

In 1980 four members of the company travelled to Australia and New Zealand, performing and leading workshops in Auckland, Wellington, Sydney and Melbourne. By the following year the Sydney and Melbourne companies were performing, followed by Auckland Wellington and Perth in 1982 and Christchurch in 1984. By the mid-eighties playback theatre was firmly established in the United States and Australia and began to develop more widely. In 1984 Jonathan Fox visited Japan, Annette Henne formed 'Playback Theatre Schweiz' in Switzerland in 1988 and Christina Hagelthorn established a company in Sweden in the same year.

The way that this work was funded has been significant in the development of playback. It was usually funded performance-by-performance

by the hosts or through the box office in the case of open public performances. Playback companies do not usually receive regular funding and there very few salaried performers. Most playback practitioners therefore work in other occupations and practice playback in their leisure time. Quite how this has influenced the development of playback is difficult to ascertain. It may have inhibited its growth and, for better or worse, it may also have left the practice rather more unchanged than if it would have been if it had to respond constantly to the demands of a paymaster.

In 1986 the original playback theatre company disbanded, exhausted by the constant performing and travelling, but by then playback seems to have been well established in the United States. The history of playback theatre from this date has been one of accelerating growth across the world and has been characterised by the challenges that result from responding to increasing cultural diversity and managing a growing organisation. In 1990 the International Playback Theatre Network was established and the first edition of its newsletter *Interplay* was published with an Australian, Mary Good, as editor. In Europe, Christina Hagelthorn formed 'The Theatre of Spontaneity International', a loose group of playback practitioners who performed together annually in a different European city.

The 1990s were clearly a period of rapid growth for the playback theatre movement. The number of companies in the United States rose rapidly and in Australia playback theatre was given considerable impetus with the establishment of the Drama Action Centre in Sydney. This centre, founded by Bridget Brandon and Francis Batten, both of whom had trained at L'Ecole Jacques Lecoq, focused on improvisation, commedia dell'arte, clowning and

community-based theatre. It provided fertile soil for the development of playback theatre companies in Australia and New Zealand with many company members training there.

The development of playback theatre in Britain has been, in contrast to other key countries, a relatively slow process. The first British company was formed in June 1991 when Susanna Cunningham and David Powley invited Christina Hagelthorn to work with a group of interested therapists, teachers and actors in York. After this weekend Playback Theatre York was formed. This company is still performing with nine of the original founding members. (It is the company that this author joined in September 1994). The formation of a London Company followed shortly after in September 1991. At the time of writing there are twelve playback companies in Britain: Belfast Playback, Bristol Playback Theatre, Fife Playback Theatre, Findhorn Playback Theatre, Groundtruth, Manchester Playback Theatre, Moving Stories, Playback AME, Playback International, Playback South, Playback Theatre York, and Random Acts.

Outside the English speaking countries playback theatre has been developed most actively in Finland, Germany and Japan. The reasons for this are no doubt complex but are certainly related to the presence of pre-existing psychodrama practice in Finland and Germany, and the work of key figures – Jonathan Fox in Germany and Japan, and Deborah Pearson, Robyn Weir and Christina Hagelthorn in Finland.

The first international playback theatre conference was held in Melbourne, Australia in 1991. There were 76 participants from Australia, New Zealand and the USA with one Swedish participant. A similar kind of

international constituency attended the second conference in Sydney in 1992. The third conference in Rautalampi, Finland in 1993 marked a significant widening of delegates: 150 participants from 19 different countries attended with significant representation from European countries for the first time. The next two conferences in Olympia, USA in 1995 and Perth, Australia in 1997 maintained those numbers. However, it was the 1999 International Playback Conference in York, England that marked a significant increase in both attendance and international representation with 265 participants from 26 different countries attending. The Eighth International Conference took place in Shizuoka, Japan in September 2003: 170 delegates attended from 20 different nations. The smaller attendance represented a decision by the International Playback Theatre Network to stage smaller conferences with a more regional focus. Accordingly the Japan conference had a greater focus on the development of playback theatre in Asia.

Rapid growth and diversification has presented considerable challenges in terms of responding to and welcoming differences in approach, while at the same time trying to maintain what is understood to be the key characteristics of playback theatre. The widening international development of playback has also caused many participants from white Caucasian backgrounds to face the complicity of their nations in the oppression of non-white, indigenous peoples. This was particularly in the case at the Perth Conference in 1997. Playback theatre grew within white, middle-class, educated communities of the Western world and, to a large extent, developed a philosophy and discourse that reflected that fact. The growth of playback within such very different countries as India, Botswana and Fiji, as well as

within such communities as the indigenous peoples in Australia, Afro-Caribbean people in the USA has challenged the movement to respond in both its practice and discourse. Judy Swallow one of the members of first playback group acknowledges this challenge:

Playback theatre has spread all over the world, and has expanded through the social and artistic visions of its practitioners. There is wonderful cross-pollination as groups meet and share new forms and ideas. Practical questions arise – inclusion/exclusion? Themes addressed overtly/covertly? How much ‘quality control’, and by whom? When can playback theatre be harmful? How can it be used to further justice? (Swallow 2000 p.16)

Great distances of discourse and ideology lie between that 1970s Sunday morning in New York State and the diverse playback communities of the early 21st century. I will argue that the current ways of theorising playback often lack the necessary flexibility to grasp contemporary practice and the complexity of the playback process.

Personal stories told in public places

I have already suggested that the relative homogeneity of the playback theatre form is problematic in that it suggests a practice that potentially may be unresponsive to the differing environments into which it is ‘transported’. Although not providing a systematic consideration of audience response, this thesis requires some understanding of how different public places influence audience decisions concerning the extent of their personal disclosure, the performers’ response, and the audience reception. I use the term ‘public’ fully recognising its ambiguity and contingency: that the nature of what is construed of as ‘public’ is a dynamic process dependent on expectation, perception and negotiation. Despite the ambiguity of the term, its usefulness

for this thesis lies in the tension between the public and the personal, which is a characteristic of all playback performances. The presence of an ‘audience’ and the spectator’s awareness of being in an audience at a theatrical event create a sense of being in a ‘public place’ — a sense which is heightened by the invitation to, as it were, ‘go public’ with personal experiences.

As I will argue in *Chapter Seven*, playback performances involve a negotiation concerning the relationship between the ‘personal’ and the ‘public’. Because audience members are invited to tell ‘personal’ stories they need to make decisions concerning their level of personal disclosure. These decisions will be crucially influenced by what kind of public space the spectator considers themselves to be in. Playback theatre, as some of its critics point out, does not offer the carefully constructed boundaries of the therapy space, yet it invites participants to tell personal experiences; this produces a tension in audiences that heightens awareness of what may or may not be revealed in particular types of public spaces. Different spaces and different audience perceptions of that space may also inflect the performers’ choices of opening moments and, subsequently, their response to audience stories.

As Henri Lefebvre makes clear a public space can never be neutral or free from social mediation. Indeed he recognises this to be a quality of all space.

Vis-à-vis lived experience, space is neither a mere ‘frame’, after the fashion of a frame of a painting, nor a form or a container of a neutral kind, designed to receive whatever is poured into it. Space is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure. (1991 p.93-94)

The spaces into which playback performers enter are already shaped by their history, architecture and the expectations of the audiences that inhabit them and this will, to some extent, determine the nature of the stories told within them, and the ways in which the performers will respond to these stories. Any particular construction of 'public' is inevitably influenced by a complex range of factors: the 'cultural institution' (Bennett 1997 p.87) in which the performance takes place; the agreement established between company and the hosts; the spectators' relationship to that space; the particular constitution of the audience; their pre-existing relationships and roles; the configuration of power relations in the institution; and the ways in which the physical boundaries of the space are defined and protected. The public nature of the space will also be constituted by the particular configuration of the auditorium and acting area, and by the expectations created through the opening words of the conductor and the actors' opening stories.

In order to exemplify these points I will briefly look at the Halifax performance which opens this thesis. Playback Theatre York did not have a direct funding relationship with staff or users at the Halifax venue. This is not always the case; sometimes the company are directly funded by the professionals working in an agency. Although guests at Halifax, it may have been that the company had rather more freedom than would have been the case if they were directly funded by the organisation. By way of contrast, in 1998 the company were funded by British Airways to perform to staff in middle management. They were much more acutely aware of their funders and of shaping a performance that would, in some way, fulfil their requirements. It is likely that this would have influenced the particular way in which the decisions

were made by both performers and spectators concerning the personal disclosure possible in the space.

The Halifax performance took place in the dayroom of a community mental health centre. The venue was located near the city centre although access was limited to professionals and those who had been accepted as members of the centre because of recognition of their mental health problems. To a significant degree spectators came to the performance with roles already defined by the institution. Users of the centre attended the performance by virtue of their role as people who had experienced mental health problems, while professionals attended as providers of therapy and specialist support. These roles may have significantly influenced the degree to which the different groups would be prepared to reveal personal material. A pattern of personal disclosure may be hypothesised here: by and large, the users of the service would expect — and be expected — to tell their personal experience to professionals but not expect that disclosure to be reciprocated. This ‘pattern’ may have been replicated in the performance. In the centre it is likely that certain types of stories, particularly those related to mental health problems, would be regularly told to professionals and would be framed within the particular understandings present in mental health contexts. Because of their understanding of their professional responsibility, professionals may be protective of users and may attempt, for their ‘safety’, to limit the kinds of stories that would be safe to tell in a public space. In the performance it is likely that these patterns of personal disclosure would be continued.

The performance took place to an audience who were familiar with each other and with the environment; it is likely that the particular patterns of

behaviour in relation to the space would already be established and would be replicated to some extent during the performance. This was particularly evident in the way in which people managed the boundary between the room in which the performance took place and the rest of the centre. The space chosen for this particular performance was a meeting room in which members of the centre were accustomed to entering and leaving informally. This pattern continued during the performance: people entered and left the space regularly (for a cigarette or to answer the phone, for example). It may be that this 'porosity' influenced decisions concerning the nature of the public space and therefore the extent of personal disclosure that was possible there. Throughout the performance there continued to be activity around the door; this may have reduced the sense of psychological safety in both the audience and the performers.

In structuring the relationship between the performers and spectators, playback companies almost always create a recognisable 'proscenium' arrangement. In the rehearsal room and in performance playback companies look to arrange the audience seating so that it faces a rectangular space (sometimes elevated) bordered at the back by a wall and arranged as already described at the outset of this thesis. As the Halifax audience entered the space they would recognise a familiar room reconfigured in this way as a theatre space. The positioning of audience seating may have suggested that there was an expectation to be relatively passive in the manner of a 'conventional' theatre audience. This expectation may have been complicated by the presence of the performers, welcoming and talking to people as they arrived, and later, by the words of the conductor encouraging them to

contribute their stories. Audience decisions about what they would contribute were also crucially influenced by the opening stories given by the actors. These moments of personal vulnerability may have created expectations regarding the level of personal disclosure and what kind of public event was taking place.

It is not just spectators whose disclosures are influenced by the nature of the public place: it is also likely that the performers will moderate the opening stories they tell and the nature of their performance according to the audience and the cultural institution in which they perform. Indeed, as a general point, one might argue that the performers' sensitivity to the space in which they are working and their capacity to modulate their performance accordingly is an important ethical issue in considering playback theatre. The level of expressed emotion, the choices made concerning the representation of the story, and the degree to which the performers 'play' with the meanings of the story, are — and perhaps should be — influenced by their perception of the public space in which they are performing.

In order to exemplify further the complexity of the processes through which different constructions of the 'public' may operate in playback performances, I will briefly discuss three further, different and contrasting 'venues' in which playback takes tends to take place: the rehearsal room, the small audience gathered in an relatively intimate space, and the large conference hall. In doing so I am aware that there is a risk of over-generalisation and that differing audience and performer responses are affected by more complex variables than are allowed for here.

The York company rehearses by staging enactments based on the personal stories told by members of the company. Rooms are chosen that will provide privacy and enough space for movement, and organised so that there is seating for the audience and a recognisable playback performance space. Although these rehearsals often take place in the rooms of a public institution (a College) this is not an event open to others; intrusions are discouraged. Non-company members are only allowed to attend after discussions and with the agreement that they take a full part in the rehearsal. The roles taken by company members are more flexible than in a performance and they will take on different roles as teller, performer, conductor and spectator according to their preference and to the needs of the event. Members of the company know each other well and this, together with the intimacy created by the space and, perhaps, the inter-changeability of roles, often permits significant personal revelation and open expression of emotion. It is also common for tellers to recount experiences that are driven less by narrative than by 'a feeling' or by a nebulous sense of discomfort. In my experience, it is more likely in rehearsal that the tellers will express their dissatisfaction with an enactment. We might say that this is the least 'public' of the performance spaces being discussed here, in the sense that tellers do not feel so acutely that they are 'going public' with their stories. They can be fairly certain of the limited dissemination of their story since there is an implicit agreement of confidentiality that is not established in other, more public, performances of playback theatre.

Often Playback Theatre York is invited to perform to a relatively small audience (15 – 30 people) who wish to explore a particular theme or a shared

set of experiences; the company regularly stage performances for General Medical Practitioners (G.P.s), for example. These performances are usually part of a wider training event and take place in a hotel function room. The G.P.s and trainers both attend and there are no intrusions into the space during the performance. Although audience members may not know each other, their shared professional background can permit stories which disclose vulnerabilities and perceived failings. However the small size of the audience can sometimes produce discomfort. Susan Bennett makes this point generally.

When a theatre has very few spectators, the sense of audience as group can be destroyed. This fragmentation of the collective can have the side-effect of psychological discomfort for the individual which inhibits or revises response. (1997 p.131)

It is not uncommon in these performances for members of the audience to draw attention to a perceived similarity with 'therapy' or 'psychotherapy' — an impression produced presumably by the invitation to tell personal stories, the small size of the audience, and the expectation that stories will be reinterpreted in some way. Considering their professional role, it is likely that the audience remain acutely aware of the consequences of telling a story and of the uncertainty of how widely their words will be disseminated. Any determination of the public nature of this space therefore is ambiguous and this can produce both anxiety and jocularity. This seems to be sometimes reflected in the stories told: some reveal the vulnerabilities and stresses of the work of a G.P. while others seem, on the surface, to be humorous incidents designed to amuse the audience and perhaps break the tension.

In contrast to rehearsals it is usual for tellers to recount experiences that have a clear narrative shape and it is much less likely that they will

express any dissatisfaction with the enactment. The levels of identification between teller and their actor are, in my experience, often intense in these performances; it is not unusual for tellers and their actors to talk at length to each other after the performance.

Finally, the size and relative anonymity of the large conference venue often produces a different kind of performance. The audience comprise of conference delegates who may not know each other or be familiar with the space. There is far less attention paid to who is allowed to enter the performance and there is often activity around the doorways during the performance as delegates leave and enter. Since playback is not usually performed in dedicated theatre spaces, the size of the audience (80-150) can produce problems with sight-lines and acoustics. These concerns, together with the need to 'entertain' a large audience, tend to produce a less intimate performance — one more directed to humour or to clear, unambiguous representations. The 'public' nature of these performances often means that the prospect of telling a 'personal' story is daunting; consequently stories tend to be ones which have a clear narrative trajectory, seem to have been told before, and are less likely to reveal the personal vulnerability of the teller. In these performances it may be that the power relations inherent in the audience significantly influences the stories told; for example in a performance to British Airways in which different levels of management were present, it was likely that there was a reluctance to voice dissent with the current policy.

This analysis of different playback performances suggests that the ways in which the public place of performance is constituted effects both the

audience contribution and the performers' response. In general, not surprisingly, as audience size and unfamiliarity to each other increases, so the levels of personal disclosure and identification decrease; it is likely that there will be more concern about how far the story will spread; the stories tend to become more structured and narrative-driven by the need for them to be 'performed'; and performers tend to take fewer risks in pushing the enactment beyond what was actually told to them. It is far less likely in larger performances that the enactments will be questioned or that the tellers will be invited to discuss them.

In each of the different environments in which playback theatre is performed different takes on what is considered 'public' and the 'personal' will be negotiated and established. This is a dynamic process: performers and spectators will be engaged in a constant negotiation and re-negotiation of what can be revealed in a public place. The nature of the autobiographical narratives and the subsequent enactments will always be inflected by these complex considerations.

Introducing the thesis

At the 1997 Symposium on Playback Theatre in Kassel, Germany, a New Zealand playback practitioner, Fe Day, warned her audience:

We often say that we are going for the 'essence' of the story. Yet, even (especially) in saying that, we have to make sure that we are not de-politicising the narrative and turning it into a myth [and, quoting Barthes she goes on] '...that abolishes the complexity of human acts ...does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, organises a world that is without contradictions because it is without depth.' (1999 p.87)

In my early work on this thesis Day's statement provoked a great deal of thought. It pointed to something of which I was becoming increasingly aware, a kind of dissonance between the language of playback and its practice. This perception was further strengthened by a conversation in York in 1997 with an actor who spoke about calling upon the 'guiding spirit of the story' as a way of inspiring her acting. This evocation of a transcendent spiritual dimension seemed not only at odds with Day's symposium presentation but also with my own reading of critical and poststructuralist theory. My interest here is in the 'discourse' of playback theatre. I shall use Roger Fowler's definition of discourse:

'Discourse' is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies, these beliefs (etc.) constitute a way of looking at the world, an organisation or representation of experience – 'ideology' in the neutral, non-pejorative sense. Different modes of discourse encode different representations of experience, and the source of these representations is the communicative context within which discourse is embedded (Hawthorn 2000 p.90).

There are, in the lexicon of playback theatre, words that seem to my ear to sit uneasily with the critical theory I was reading, and indeed with the robust and rather irreverent practices of the company of which I was a member. Words such as the 'authenticity' and the 'presence' of the actor (Salas 1999 p.25), 'elders' (Fox 1999 p.13), 'apprentice' (Fox 1999 p.13), 'charisma' (Salas, 1999 p.25), 'service' (Fox 1994) and 'ritual' (Fox 1999) alerted me to a potential dissonance between this language and both my experience of playback theatre and reading. The accumulation of such words not only suggests a dependence upon some sort of stable source of authority beyond contingency and mediation, but also they seem to display a kind of nostalgic yearning for a certain type of less complex social order. These words block critical thought.

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As Adorno might argue, they constitute a 'jargon of authenticity' as '...they ascend beyond the realm of the actual, conditioned, and contestable' (Adorno 2003 p.7).

A Reflexive Moment

A sense of betrayal has accompanied the writing of this section. I have almost exclusively quoted from Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas and, although this is not surprising since they have written significantly more than any other in the field, it does produce in me a rather uneasy feeling of betrayal. The selections from their work have been chosen to bring the writing into question and to expose playback's discourse to a critique. I have met and worked with both of them and this process is made more uncomfortable because of that.

However, there is another accompanying feeling, which is one of dissent. In my experience of the playback theatre community there is often a rather deferential position towards Jonathan Fox in particular. This is perhaps due to the broad cultural composition of the network and the need to cohere around a leader figure. Nevertheless this deference may tell us something about the playback community itself. It is perhaps indicative of an immaturity in the movement that it cannot quite tolerate a pluralist and democratic organisation open to dissent and even satire.

To be actively engaged in such a personally challenging form as playback is often to be relatively unquestioning about the discourse and the explanatory theories employed. One becomes an insider more concerned with 'doing playback' than with the inevitable ambiguities and contradictions of the

practice. It was disturbing, on the one hand, to use and 'trust in' such phrases as 'the essence of the story', 'the presence' or 'authenticity' as a means of explaining playback and on the other to read such poststructuralist and postmodern theorists as Derrida and Lyotard. This disturbance is a function of being both 'inside' as a practicing member and 'outside' as a scholar, it calls for different registers of writing to be used in capturing these and other subject positions.

It is possible to trace this conflict through the chapters that follow. However, what follows is also deeply inflected by my engagement with playback theatre and my growing appreciation of its complexity and indefinability. I began rather naively with an assumption that an investigation into the processes of playback theatre would involve a steady revelation of understanding – an accumulation of workable and relatively unambiguous concepts and maybe even the discovery of truth about playback theatre. Such a belief was certainly to prove naïve. The use of the metaphor 'journey' is perhaps something of a cliché to describe the experience of the researcher, nevertheless, it is the most prevalent figure I have used to understand, for myself, the work of the last six years. In fact perhaps a sea journey is closer to the mark. As is reflected in some of what follows the sense of being without moorings, of being thrown around by strange and unsettling currents, best conveys the experience of this researcher.

Since September 1994, as mentioned already, I have been an active performing member of Playback Theatre York. This has given me particular 'insider' perspectives on the practice of playback theatre that I will make full use of throughout this thesis. It has also allowed me a range of subject

positions that may be actively employed and exploited. In *Chapter Two* these subject positions are explored. I propose that the writer can speak not only with a 'cooler' academic voice but also with that of the 'apologist', 'the believing insider', the 'teller' of his own personal stories for playback enactment, the 'performer' and the committed company member. The 'advantage' of my active involvement in a playback company accomplishes three purposes.

Firstly, it allows for particular insights into the practice of playback theatre that would not be available from the 'outside'. There is a risk of 'going native' and being unable to maintain a critical position in relation to the field, but that risk, if acknowledged, may itself be useful in shedding light on what it is like 'inside the field'.

Secondly, the use of different subject positions is intended to indicate the self, not as an irreducible entity, capable of self-knowledge and autonomy, but as a '... a flux of contextualised identities...' (Hutcheon 1989 p.59). Or, as Lyotard puts it, a site or a '...post through which various kinds of messages pass' (Lyotard 1984 p.15). I am suggesting the use of multiple identities that are 'evoked' and 'created' in the field (Lincoln and Denzin 2000 p.1060).

Thirdly, the range of subject positions available potentially permits a methodological approach to the thesis that is consonant with – or resonates with – the form itself. Playback theatre is an improvised form in which the autobiographical story of a 'teller' is 'exposed' to the spontaneous response of playback actors and musicians. The performers do not, and cannot, *replicate* that story, instead they seek not only to represent it in some way but also to 'live inside' it for themselves, to ask questions of it and, in some instances, to

destabilise the teller's narrative. The enactment exposes the teller's narrative to a range of subject positions. The use of multiple identities in the research narrative is intended to be consonant with that parallel process in playback theatre.

In *Chapter Three*, I examine the nature of the autobiographical narrative told in playback theatre performances. I am particularly keen to bring into question the notion, often employed in playback discourse, of the 'essence' of the story. To presuppose that the teller's story has an essence is to presuppose that it is a stable entity uninflected by historical and performative contingency. To presuppose this essence is to fail to recognise that each time the story is told it will change in response to the differing audiences and the personal necessities acting upon its teller. It also fails to recognise that the past is, to a large extent, created in and for the present and so, if the story has an essence, it is a fluid and dynamic thing caught up in 'the game' of signification (Derrida 1978).

It was the interrogation of the notion of the 'heart' or 'essence' of the story, prompted by Day's statement that, for me, began a process of re-thinking playback theatre. Attending a performance of *Lifegame* by the Improbable Theatre Company at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in April 1998 further accelerated this process. *Lifegame* is a format devised by Keith Johnstone in which one person is invited to tell their life story and see that enacted. The programme notes informed us that the aim of *Lifegame* was

To talk to someone about their life, improvise scenes based on the stories they tell, find out 'how it was' and maybe as we are watching remember how it was for us. (The Improbable Theatre Company 1998)

It was the striking similarities and differences to playback theatre that were interesting and provocative, particularly in relation to the phrase to 'find out how it was'. Certainly the performers were aiming for as much verisimilitude as they could with the teller's memories, to the extent that he was asked to lay out the scene for the actors and given a bell to ring if the actors were particularly 'close to the truth' and 'a buzzer' if they were off the mark.

Playback theatre does not give that kind of control to the teller, or to put this another way, actors in playback have a great deal of freedom in developing the enactment. If it is not helpful to conceive of playback actors playing back 'the heart of the story' or 'to show it how it was' – as the performers of Lifegame seek to do – then what are playback performers offering? The answer to this question is, in many ways, central to this entire thesis. The performers do not portray essences or replicate the past, rather they respond to the teller's narrative within the dramaturgy of playback.

Lawrence Cahoone (1996 p.16) writes that cultural forms constitute themselves as much by defining what they are *not* as by establishing what they are. In this respect playback theatre is similar to all theatrical forms. In *Chapter Four* particularly, I will be interested in how playback theatre constitutes its 'otherness' or how, as a 'cultural unit', it is maintained in its '...apparent unity only through an active process of exclusion, opposition, and hierarchization' (Cahoone 1996 p.16). In the case of playback, this process of creating identity through establishing 'otherness' has notably operated in relation to psychodrama and Boal's theatre of the oppressed. Together with dramatherapy, these disciplines are most closely allied to the practice of playback – they can be said to dramatise the personal experience of the

audience/participants and make (albeit very different) claims for the efficacy of doing so.

Playback theatre differs significantly from other cognate disciplines in respect of the position of the teller. Psychodrama, forum theatre and dramatherapy, in different ways, all emphasise the importance of engaging the teller in the dramatic action through physical participation. They argue that to do so is anti-oppressive in Boal's case or empowering in Moreno's. Playback does not do so: the teller is always a spectator of the dramatisation of his or her story. This presents particular ethical challenges to the practice of playback and the playback community do not seem to have responded systematically to this challenge. I examine this issue and argue that the particular position of the teller – on stage and in view of the audience – may promote a high level of reflexivity. Because the spectator can watch the teller watching the stage action, his or her awareness of the means of representation of personal experience is heightened.

The transition of the spectator to storyteller has, I would suggest, a destabilising impact on the event. At the very least, it suggests shifting experiences of identification, empathy and engagement with what is happening in the performance space. The continued presence of the spectator/storyteller on stage during the enactment of their story compounds the complexity of the spectator's and actor's experience. In doing so playback theatre draws attention to itself as artefact. It is a crucial characteristic of playback that the spectators have already heard the story that is to be enacted. Their attention, therefore, is likely to be drawn to the nature of its representation. What is created is a story within a story, a 'framed tale' in

which the spectators have the opportunity to watch theatre *being watched and being performed*.

In this chapter I will also examine the particular juxtaposition of the 'telling' and the 'enactment' in playback performances. I will suggest that the contrast between the 'performative excess' permitted within the 'enactment' and the relatively 'literal' and verbal codes of the 'telling' draws the spectator's attention to the way that personal experience may be represented. Fox claims that playback theatre permits a 'different kind of dialogue' within the performance, I will examine this claim and suggest that the use of the figurative and symbolic in playback's dramaturgy has the effect of opening up a kind of *hermeneutic play* within and between the personal stories told. The teller's narrative – already inflected within the conductor/teller dyad and by the performative nature of its production – may be seen as an open field of association, reference and allusion. The teller's narrative has opened up to an appreciation of its gaps and absences.

The International Playback Theatre Network write in their publicity that '[a]uthenticity in the spontaneous moment underlies Playback theatre practice' (IPTN, 1999). In *Chapter 5*, I will question this statement. The notion of authenticity does not sufficiently convey the play of meaning and signification in playback performances. In this chapter I will argue that rather than conceptualising the foundational self as the source of the actor's work, in playback enactments the performer draws upon a variety different subject positions in order to represent the teller's narrative.

Playback dramatisations are improvised. In *Chapter Six* I will look at the necessary conditions for such 'spontaneous' engagement with the teller's

narrative. I will qualify and nuance the contention that the performer's response emerges out 'the spontaneous moment'. The performers do not plan the enactments beforehand, nevertheless they are based on certain patterns of response that are developed through rehearsal and previous performances. Their work does not escape the complex process of intertextuality as explained by Roland Barthes: 'Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of code, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social language...' (Barthes 2000 p.183).

Nevertheless, the fact that the work is improvised is important. The improvisational nature of playback enactments undermines those explanations in playback discourse which draw upon assumptions of authenticity, presence or essence. Instead a 'successful' playback enactment plays with signification and with the meanings that we make of human experience. This play is largely enabled by the fact that the enactments are improvised.

In playback theatre personal stories are told in public places, this raises significant ethical issues considered in *Chapter Seven*. Once the teller tells the story he does not have a significant and systematic opportunity to correct the veracity of the enactment, as, for example, the teller does in psychodrama or in Lifegame – there is only a brief chance for feedback at the end of the enactment. To put this bluntly: the teller must relinquish their story to the performers.

The performer's task is not just to enact the story for the teller, they have a double audience: the teller and the rest of the spectators. The personal story of the teller is always inflected by the performer's awareness of

their audience. This, together with the observation that the performers will always filter the story through their own personal and collective idiosyncrasies, suggests considerable ethical and political implications. In response to these issues, Fox asserts his belief in the 'citizen actor' who performs as needed and 'melts back into the social fabric', who 'voluntarily absorb[s] the pain and problems of others' and who offers 'Service without security, without fanfare, without adulation' (Fox 1994 p.214). He concludes by calling for 'ultimately a theatre of love' (Fox 1994 p.216). Rightly, I think, Fox resists listing ethical principles or setting standards of practice, calling instead for 'grace', nevertheless the accumulation of such quasi-religious words as 'service', 'grace' and 'absorbing the pain and problems of others', redolent as they are of the New Testament, is problematic. They present problems for an organisation committed to 'honouring and acknowledging diversity' (IPTN 1999).

In *Chapter Seven*, I will explore an ethics of playback that does not rely on such transcendent language nor create deontological principles of practice. I will propose an ethics that is relational and rather than being concerned with ethical 'positions' is rooted in 'disposition' toward the 'other'. I suspect this is what Fox means by 'grace' when he writes:

Non-scripted theatre will always be somewhat rough-hewn, a theatre of service will always be pulled down by the grubby realities of everyday life (the hall will be cold, the crowd unruly, the host frazzled), as performers we will always fail, trapped by our own anxieties and imperfections. It is not understanding alone that can help us cope with these imperfections – or better organisation or even higher performance standards. We must also believe in grace (Fox 1994 p.214).

In acknowledgement of diversity, however, I would subscribe to Georges Bataille's wish:

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My wish is that in any love of the unknown ... we can, by ousting transcendence, attain such great simplicity as to relate that love to an earthly love, echoing it to infinity (Bataille 1997 p.97).

Hermeneutic play

To introduce and rehearse my argument for a view of playback as the exposure of the teller's narrative to *hermeneutic play* – a polyphonous play on meaning and an event that draws attention to acts of representation, I will draw upon two psychoanalytic sources: the French psychoanalyst and philosopher, Luce Irigaray, and the British psychotherapist, Christopher Bollas. While Irigaray profoundly unsettles Platonic foundationalism and so radically questions any direct correspondence between the real and the represented, Bollas along with others (For example Brooks 1994; Phillips 2002) have re-envisaged psychoanalysis as the 'art of redescription' (Phillips 2002 p.131).

Irigaray in her work *Speculum of the Other Woman* performs an analysis of Plato's allegory of the cave. The dwellers of the cave believe that the images that flicker on the cave are real when, in fact, they are shadows of the ideal forms outside of the cave and inaccessible to all but the philosopher. Irigaray effects a twist in this familiar allegory, re-figuring the cave as the womb and the screen as the theatre – a 'womb-theatre'. The mimicry of the screen is a kind of 'ocular funny house' (Diamond 1989 p.64) in which you will lose your bearings. The cave as theatre, which, for Plato, is a place of deception and mimicry, is reclaimed by Irigaray as a place of female subversion of the male logos. As Diamond writes:

Plato's 'Hystera' posits two mimetic systems that exist simultaneously, one repressed by the other. Patriarchal mimesis, articulated by Plato and Aristotle, is the traditional mimetic system, in which the model, the Form or Ideal, is distinguishable from and transcendentally beyond shadows – images in the mirror – mere copies. Subverting patriarchal mimesis is what we might call mimesis-mimicry, in which the production of objects, shadows, and voices is excessive to the truth/illusion structure of mimesis, spilling into mimicry, multiple 'fake offspring'. (Diamond 1999 p.64-5)

For me Irigaray's analysis is one that suggests the possibility of re-envisioning playback theatre as a kind of excessive destabilisation of the meanings we attribute to – and the narratives we create of – human experience.

Bollas is also concerned with a re-figuring – this time of Freud and the notion of free association – a process which Freud saw as being an important vehicle toward truth that is inaccessible to the conscious mind. In his re-framing of the relationship between the therapist and patient, Bollas asserts that the fundamental agency of change in psychoanalysis is the free associative and playful discourse in that relationship. He writes:

If unconscious thinking is too complex to be grasped by consciousness, if one person's unconscious can communicate with another's unconscious mind only by playing with it, then psychoanalysis is a radical act – freeing the subject from character restraints and intersubjective compliances through the naturally liberating and expressive medium of free association. ...The fundamental agency of change in a psychoanalysis is the continuous exercise of this freedom, which ultimately deconstructs and disseminates any narrative action ... and establishes in place of the morality of the thematic a dissembling spirit that plays the self into myriad realities. *All along, what has seemed to be the means to truth – free association – is the truth itself...* (Bollas 1995 p.69-70) [my emphasis]

Having rejected the notion that playback performers replicate the teller's story, or convey its essence or offer authoritative interpretations, I want to explore the proposal that playback can provide a space for 'free associative discourse' that disrupts the teller's narrative by exposing it to the multiple perspectives of

the performers. In 'ousting the transcendent', is it possible to view the human, contingent and 'earthly love' in the playback process?

Chapter Two

A Method for Playback Theatre Research.

10th February 1998

'All at Sea'

I am swimming at night toward a destination that seems to come no closer. At first it was easy. I was in familiar shallows, the water was warm and the sand anchored me reassuringly. I had swum here many times before and the sea held no terrors. As I swam further unfamiliar currents began to pull on me, at first it was exhilarating, never before had I smelled these particular seas. (It was like a northerner somewhere south of the Loire scenting the Mediterranean for the first time.) I swam on enjoying the sensation of these strange waters and thought of myself as a strong swimmer well able to negotiate their seductiveness. As time went on, however, I lost sight of the shore; those reassuring twinkling lights were enveloped by the night and the rising swell. My destination seemed no closer, in fact, if I am truthful; it seemed to have disappeared altogether. I did not panic; I told myself that all swimmers if they are to enter these waters must accept the implacable force of the sea. They must not be afraid to surrender themselves to its power. I relished the thought of the immeasurable fathoms below and the deep undertows which were beginning to turn me so that one minute, I saw into the depths and the next, the night sky revealed impossibly faraway light.

It occurred to me that I no longer need resist, I could submit myself to the ocean and accept whatever truths it might reveal to me. I had long forgotten why I had left the shore and where I was heading. At times I dreamt

of loved ones asking me how my journey was progressing and being puzzled by my elliptical responses. These dreams would trouble me. I had to reach my destination, there were people depending upon my safe arrival, while others, I knew would relish the news of my loss at sea. However, it was no longer possible to resist and neither did I wish to, the currents were intoxicating and I would stay with them as long as they would bear me.

It was then that I thought of maps. Once I had been skilled in the drawing of maps. I had thought I had an unerring sense of direction and location. But now these maps no longer served, they had been land maps and I needed sea charts. I needed to know about eddies and flows, currents and undertows. In fact, I realised, I had never really prepared myself for this swim, I had set off trusting in my powers of navigation and now I knew this was woefully insufficient. A kind of self-doubt began to set in. I imagined the taunts of others, telling me of my arrogance and hubris. I heard the voices of ancient fathers reminding me that I had not listened to their words of wisdom and of mothers calling me home. The sky darkened, the sea swelled to impossible heights and I knew then I was lost.

I wrote these lines through the night after being unable to sleep; I awoke with the image in my head of a swimmer in the sea at night and began to write in response to the insistence of the image. As I wrote I realised I was exploring the sense of being lost and disorientated in my current research into playback theatre.

Designing a method

Don't awake these words in vain
because they have no armour for their nakedness
unless love is your guide.
(Fragment of a poem by Leo Vroman, roughly translated from the Dutch by
Henk Hoffman.)

At the first symposium of playback theatre held in Kassel, Germany in 1997, in the course of a discussion concerning researching playback, I told a number of delegates the story of a dream I had had some weeks before:

I am visiting the house of Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas; they stage a performance, which all those present, except me, think of as excellent. Later we sit around a large wood table; Jo Salas and Jonathan Fox present me with a fine and valuable blue vase. As I take it from them I drop it and it breaks into tiny pieces on the floor. With horror I stare at it and wake up.

With fellow delegates of the symposium I wonder out loud if the dream had something to do with my fear that, in some way, researching playback theatre would destroy it – that looking intensely and critically at something to which I am emotionally, personally and socially committed will result in it breaking like the blue vase. In response to these thoughts Henk Hoffman, a playback practitioner from Holland, wrote the above poem in my notebook and provided the rough translation.

Such an anxiety has proved unfounded, yet it may be the sequela to a set of ideological assumptions concerning critical thought and playback theatre. Assumptions that wish to mystify and protect its ineffable 'heart' - essentialist perspectives that seem common in playback literature. Despite this observation and in order to allay that fear and to avoid being *lost at sea*, I looked for a methodological approach that would be sympathetic to playback theatre and would be able to catch the complexity, intimacy and vivacity of its

practice. McNiff 's question of arts-based research seemed relevant: 'Does the language of inquiry correspond to the expression of the phenomena being studied?' (McNiff 1998 p.40) In this chapter I will present the results of this search for method. My analysis will begin with a discussion of the complex relationship between field and method in the research of playback theatre.

A reflexivity of field and method: playback theatre as encounter, research as encounter.

Playback theatre may be viewed as an *encounter* between the performer, the teller, their story and the audience. The performers' response to the teller's story draws upon their personal experience, their grasp of human narrative, their psycho-biological response and their understanding of dramatic form.

Like playback theatre, the research task may also be conceived of as an *encounter*. It is an encounter between the researcher, the object of enquiry and the audience who will eventually 'consume' the work. The researcher's *response* may also draw upon personal experience, narrative understanding, cognitive and even somatic response, and an understanding of methodological forms and approaches.

I am struck by the 'fertile' reciprocity that is available when one holds the roles of researcher and playback actor in simultaneous awareness. It has seemed to me that, in maintaining such a double awareness, I would achieve a methodological approach that is sympathetic and responsive to playback theatre. Another way of putting this is to say that field and method need to be held in a *reflexive relationship* with each other. The task was to devise a

methodological approach that would be *congruent* with, or sensitive to, the playback process itself, one that possesses some of the qualities of playback. This chapter explores this fertile relationship between research method and playback theatre – expecting that one will shed light on the other. I propose to consider two metaphors of the research task - *the researcher as storyteller and the researcher as performer*.

The challenge of ephemerality

The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that the task of phenomenology was

...to bring back all the living relationships of experience, as the fisherman's net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed. (Merleau-Ponty 1962 p.xv)

The research of improvised theatre practice involves significant methodological problems and opportunities. Theatre is a live event, taking place in the here and now. Attempts to preserve its 'liveness' run into significant difficulties. Memory of the performance decays quickly and forms of video and audio recording cannot retain the vivacity of the moment. The particular contexts of the event: the perceptual sets of the participants and the particular patterns of meaning that emerge during the performance cannot be preserved.

Specifically, playback theatre derives its energy through relationships in the here and now, relationships between performers, spectators and tellers. Our memory of these relationships is always partial (Clifford 1986) in both senses of the word – it records only 'part of' any experience and it is always and unavoidably subjective. In order to respond to *the challenge of*

ephemerality, a method that is emergent, improvisational and responsive to the moment is desirable - a method consonant with playback theatre practice.

Of course, we might note the limitations of Merleau-Ponty's metaphor: those quivering fish will die once they reach the surface. Even if efforts were made to preserve their life, their behaviour would change outside their natural environment and under the inspection of the 'observer'.

'Up close and personal': the participant researcher.

A naïve view of the researcher, separated from the field of research by objectivity and protective protocols is, at the very least, problematic for many researchers in the arts and social sciences (Blumer 1969). The use of insider 'narratives of the self' (Richardson 1994) or 'personal ethnography' (Crawford 1996) or 'autoethnography' (Ellis and Bochner 2000) is now generally well accepted. Nevertheless, there are significant methodological problems for the researcher who is immersed in the field of research and has relationships with professional and personal 'research subjects' that extends far beyond the research focus. There is, to use the language of anthropology, the danger of 'going native' and of 'becoming the phenomenon' (Jorgensen 1989 p.63). I include a piece written at the outset of my study in order to illustrate my position 'inside' the field of enquiry.

This group with whom I intend to conduct research have a shared history with me for two years before the commencement of this research. They have played my stories and I have played theirs. They know of some of my history and I of theirs. This seems a most important set of relationships to

acknowledge and position my research with regard to. Many of the traditional roles of the researcher are, therefore, unavailable to me. I am a committed and very involved member of the company. The company plays a very important part in how I describe myself and construct my identity. Rather like Jules-Rossette (cited in Hammersley and Atkinson 1983) who converted to the religious group she was studying, I am an active and 'believing' member of this group I am to study.

It is a question of how the researcher is positioned in, what might be called, the *processual flux* of the research. Superficially, the question suggests two roles: the critical observer, positioned 'outside' the field and the 'engaged participant' positioned 'inside'. From each position the research field will be perceived and 'constructed' differently, and, of central importance, the voice or 'register' of the research presented from these different positions will vary. The register delivered by the 'insider' immersed in the life of the 'ensemble' and the empathies and intimacies of playback acting will be of a different quality from that delivered from the outside. The task is to maintain both positions (and more) – 'inside' and 'outside' the research field – and to render the voices that may be heard from these positions. As Terry Eagleton maintains:

To be inside and outside a position at the same time – to occupy a territory while loitering sceptically on the boundary – is often where the most intensely creative ideas come from. (2003 p.40)

Of course there are far more perspectives from which the participant researcher is able to write – there are multiple consciousnesses (Lincoln and

Denzin 2000) at play – and these different registers will need to be identified and distinguished. As James Clifford writes:

The staging and valuing of multiple and allegorical registers or ‘voices’ becomes an important area.... interrupting the privileged monotone of scientific representation. (1986 p.103)

Playback Theatre as a methodological metaphor.

There is always a reciprocal relationship between methodology and the object of research - each inflects the other. A chosen methodology will profoundly influence what is drawn from the ‘field’ and, in sensitive research, the field should alter and modify the method. Therefore, the choice of research perspective and method becomes one of great significance. I propose holding method and field in *simultaneous relationship* by employing the practice of playback theatre as a metaphorical device to structure the method.

Clifford (1986 p.12) argues that the predominant metaphors in anthropological research are ‘visual’: they ‘...presuppose a standpoint outside – looking at, objectifying, or, somewhat closer, “reading” a given reality’. Drawing on Edward Said’s polemic on ‘Orientalism’ (Said 1978), he proposes that the predominance of such visual tropes render the ‘other’ separate and discrete and provide the ‘knowing observer’ with a dominant standpoint. He continues:

Once cultures are no longer prefigured visually ... it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is *an interplay of voices*, of positioned utterances. The writer’s ‘voice’ pervades and situates the analysis, and objective, distancing rhetoric is renounced....The evocative performative elements of ethnography are legitimated. (1986 p.12) [my emphasis]

Valerie Janesick proposes the metaphor of choreography in research writing:

Because dance and choreography are about lived experience, choreography seems to me the perfect metaphor for discussing qualitative research design. Because the qualitative researcher is the research instrument, the metaphor is even more apropos for this discussion, as the body is the instrument of the dance. (2000 p.380)

If it were possible to match the research method with the processes inherent in the object of research then certain reciprocal benefits would flow between researcher and researched. For example, a significant level of reflexivity would certainly be achieved if the method shed light on the field of research itself, so that the problems encountered in the method informed the researcher about the nature of what was being interrogated. And contrariwise, the reflexive symbiosis between method and field would be deepened if the nature of the object of research allowed for the modification and attuning of the method. As Charmaz and Mitchell write 'Method bequeaths meaning'. (1997 p.210) Of course, this is highly theoretical and the efficacy of this approach will be borne out in practice. However, my proposal is to design a methodological perspective on playback theatre that energises the improvisational and, most importantly, multi-perspectival processes at work within the genre itself.

Research Methods.

Where did you put the answer?

'It's OK, I put it in my brain'

'Can you find it?'

'No I have to wait, but don't worry it will come out when it wants to'

I want the answer now. I think I'll make a hole in your head to let the answer out'

'All right calm down, the answer is 6'

'Good, now what's the question?'

'That's in your brain'

'Oh, so it is. How many legs has a donkey and a half?'

'Good, now let's put the two together'

Ivor Cutler's performed poem conveys something of my experience of developing this thesis. As a research tutor for undergraduate students, I strongly advise them to be clear about their research question from the outset. I warn them that if they are not clear, they will lose focus and find it difficult to establish a clear methodology. In this research I have not followed my own advice. Beginning with the broad question 'What are the processes inherent in playback theatre?' my points of focus have ranged widely. Questions have been investigated, found to be inadequate and discarded. Lines of argument have been followed and have opened up into ever-broadening directions with a disorientating array of possible diversions. I have experienced moments when I have felt totally 'at sea' and others when I have made exciting discoveries – often at the same time.

In her essay on 'The Choreography of Qualitative Research Design', Valerie Janesick warns of the dangers of 'methodolatry' (2003), She writes:

I use the term methodolatry, a combination of 'method' and 'idolatry', to describe a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual story being told. Methodolatry is the idolatry of method, a slavish attachment and devotion to method, that so often overtakes the discourse in the education and human services fields. (2003 p.64)

It is, she argues, a tendency which leads to the separation of 'experience' from 'knowing'. Setting aside the problematic binary she creates here, her warning is apposite, especially, I would suggest, in the research of improvisational theatre. It would seem inadequate to constrict the process of discovery by the domination of method.

Accordingly, I have sought to allow the method(s) to emerge out of my active involvement in playback, rather than to impose one from the outset. I

am aware that this exposes me to the criticism that the work lacks methodological rigour. However, as Hammersley and Atkinson write ‘...it is frequently only over the course of the research that one discovers what the research is really about’. (1983 p.175) This sentiment is reflected in the writing of this thesis, with the caveat that, in line with my rejection of a ‘foundationalist’ project to ‘uncover’ existent ‘truths’, discovering ‘what the research is really about’ needs to be nuanced. The telling of personal narratives in public places and their improvised dramatisation in front of an audience opens up such complexities that the desire to discover what the research story ‘is really about’ will remain, almost certainly, unrealised.

Bearing in mind Janesick’s warnings against methodolatry, my intent has been to explore what kinds of ideas and perspectives emerge when such ‘staples’ of playback discourse as ‘essence of the story’, ‘presence’ of the actor and ‘authenticity’ are questioned. As I explained in *Chapter One*, the direction and method of my thesis might be summarised as an exploration of the implications that flow from the rejection of such ‘foundationalist’ (Rorty 1999) assumptions. If the stories told in playback, and the dramatisations that follow, cannot be ‘grounded’ in integral, autonomous selves or in essential narratives that lie beyond mediation, how can the process be conceptualised?

I argue that, in playback theatre, the performers’ *response* to the autobiographical narrative is always inflected by context, ideology and desire. Analogously, the *response* of the researcher is similarly inflected. As a consequence I acknowledge the contingency of my writing and the complexity and polyphony of writing ‘from the inside’.

From the 'inside'.

It would be naive to assume a 'unity' of voice that may speak from 'inside' playback theatre, as Elzbieta Skolodowska writes:

The discourse of a witness cannot be a reflection of his or her experience, but rather a refraction determined by the vicissitudes of memory, intention, ideology. (cited in Beverley 2003 p.323)

My 'inside reporting' is inevitably characterised 'by ambiguities, silences and absences' that result from the process of 'selecting and editing in a way consonant with the literary form' (Skolodowska cited in Beverley 2003 p.323). It is 'partial' in the sense that it is both incomplete and subjective, and 'multiple' because it mimics some of the subject positions I have assumed in my relations with the people and practice of playback theatre.

In this thesis I have attempted to identify some of these subject positions in order to convey the complexity of engagement in the field. These were gradually 'discovered' and named as the encounter between researcher and participant developed. They seek to capture the 'voices' of the 'apologist' (or the believing insider); the 'performer'; the 'reflecting actor'; the 'writer' responding to the tensions of critically approaching the genre; the 'teller' of my personal stories in playback theatre; and the 'novelist' seeking to convey and condense the phenomenological experience of performing in playback theatre.

I will clarify, exemplify, and establish the presentational conventions used for these subject positions later in this chapter. However, a brief discussion of the 'novelist' is in order here, since it is perhaps the most unusual of my strategies. Barbara Tedlock writes about the use of what she calls 'ethnographic novels' (2003 p.461). She describes the work of Hilda

Kuper who wrote a novel (1965), a play (1970) and short stories based on her ethnographic experiences. These fictional works, according to Tedlock, conform '...not only to the principles set up within the text itself, but also to those within the external culture the novel describes' (2003 p.461).

What I am suggesting here is that fictional writing offers the potential of representing the phenomenological engagement in the field. Laurel Richardson calls this kind of writing 'ethnographic fiction' (2000 p.932) and, quoting Ernest Lockridge, claims that it is a process of 'using the imagination to discover and embody truth' (2000 p.933). Mary and Kenneth Gergen term this strategy 'literary styling', they write:

The use of literary styling signals to the reader that the account does not function as a map of the world (and, indeed, that the mapping metaphor is flawed), but as an interpretive activity addressed to a community of interlocutors. (2000 p.1029)

Although, as they point out, this approach can be open to the criticism of singularity of voice – the 'lone author commands the discursive domain in full rhetorical regalia' (2000 p.1029). Nevertheless, they believe that combining it with other methods can offset the criticism. I am aware that the status of such writing is questionable. It cannot act as evidence, but rather as exemplification and condensation of thoughts and experiences encountered in fieldwork. Extracts are provided in the text of this thesis which are taken from a short story entitled *A Rehearsal*, the full text of which can be found in *Appendix Three*.

In 'interrupting' the academic voice with these subject positions my aim was to create documents that unsettled the boundaries that are often central 'to the notion of a self studying an other' (Tedlock 2003 p.174) and to

suggest the polyphony of playback performances. The different voices heard in my writing are designed to enact the processes of hermeneutic play that, I propose, run through effective playback theatre. In a way parallel to playback, my aim is to open up the 'object' of enquiry to processes of reflexive 'multi-voicing' (Gergen and Gergen 2000 p.1029) in order that the complexity of performing autobiographical memory is maintained. The success or otherwise of this venture will be determined by the extent to which a sense of the improvised and the emergent is maintained in the writing.

As the reader will nevertheless discover, in recognition of the scholarly nature of this thesis, the academic voice is most active. Although recognising the impossibility of obtaining a 'God's eye view' in research, the academic voice functions as a 'facilitator' of other voices and as the means through which the argument of this thesis is articulated.

Recording performances

Throughout the course of this research I have been actively involved with Playback Theatre York. I have performed in, or less often I have watched, a considerable number of performances. During that time I have experimented with different ways of recording these. Usually I have been performing and have, therefore, made notes as soon as possible after the event – usually on the journey home or in the course of the following day. Other members of the company have sometimes helped me to remember the details of these performances. On one occasion, from the audience, I wrote out the dialogue and the action as accurately as I could. An enactment from this, entitled *The Dream of Murder*, is detailed in *Chapter Three*. I submitted the text of this to

the Company soon after the event so they could make corrections and additions. I also video-recorded one story and enactment from a Playback York rehearsal and I have included sequences from this in *Chapter Four*. At the request of the teller and to protect his anonymity and that of the people to whom he refers in his story, I have not submitted this video and have changed the names of all the participants.

A list of these Playback Theatre York performances and rehearsals is set out below. I have detailed the date, venue and nature of the event, and the audience. I have also noted the means of recording used and, where relevant, I have stipulated from which subject position(s) the recordings were made.

Date	Venue/Event	Audience	Means of recoding/subject position	Where used in this thesis
May 1997	Public performance in Helmsley	General public	Notes made afterwards as 'performer' and 'reflecting actor'	Chapter 2
October 1998	Rehearsal before performance	Company members not involved in performing	Notes made afterwards as 'teller'	Chapter 3
October 1998	Chester College	Students and staff of the College	Notes made during the performance as 'audience member' and then transcribed	Chapter 3

			and viewed/ corrected by company members	
January 1999	Rehearsal in York	Company members and visiting members of another company, 'Action Replay'	Video set up in the audience.	Chapter 4
December 1999	Halifax	Users of mental health services and professionals	Notes made after the performance as 'performer' and in discussions with Company members	Chapter 1 and Chapter 6
January 2000	Dundee Repertory Theatre	Users of mental health services and professionals	Notes made after the performance as 'performer'	Chapter 7
February 2000	A mental health centre in Newcastle	Users of the centre and workers based there	Notes made after the performance as 'performer'	Chapter 5 Also see <i>Appendix 5</i>
November 2000	Bradford Conference of gay and lesbian young people	Gay and lesbian young people	Notes made after the performance as 'performer'	Chapter 6
May 2001	'The Arts and G.P. Practice' training in Harrogate	General Medical Practitioners	Notes made after the performance as 'performer' and as 'reflecting actor'	Chapter 4

July 2001	Hotel in Newcastle	Members of the North East Change Council.	Notes made after the performance as 'performer' and as 'reflecting actor'	Chapter 4 Also see <i>Appendix 4</i>
April 2001	Newcastle	Professionals in health and social care	Notes made after the performance as 'performer'	Chapter 4
June 2001	British Psychodrama Association Conference, Sheffield	Psychodramatists	Notes made after the performance and discussions with Company members	Chapter 4
May 2002	'The Arts and G.P. Practice' training in Harrogate	General Medical Practitioners	Notes made after the performance	Chapter 4
April 2003	Aston Villa Football Ground. National Institute for Mental Health Conference	Professionals in mental health and those who had used services	Notes made after the performance as 'performer' and as 'reflecting actor'	Chapter 6
March 2003	York	Members of the company in rehearsal	Notes made after the rehearsal as a 'performer and 'reflecting actor'	Chapter 7

June 2003	Hebden Bridge Rehearsal weekend	Members of both companies.	Notes made immediately after the enactment as audience member	Chapter 7
August 2003	Rehearsal	Members of Playback Theatre York	Notes made after the rehearsal	Chapter 5

Table One (A table to represent the performances and rehearsals used for analysis and exemplification in this thesis)

Lexicon

At the beginning of this research I created a lexicon of words and phrases used in the discourse of Playback Theatre York and in the literature. Although it has not been used systematically throughout the research it did serve as a useful way of distancing me from, and so giving me a critical perspective upon, the discourse of playback theatre practitioners. As I noted in *Chapter One*, certain terms and phrases such as ‘ritual’, ‘being authentic’, the ‘presence of the actor’, and ‘essence of the story’ have been particularly useful. This lexicon, developed in 1997, is laid out in *Appendix Two*.

Writing as a method of inquiry

Laurel Richardson deplors the advice given to social science writers that they should only begin to write after they have planned exactly what they want to say. This ‘static model of writing’ is, she argues, a ‘sociohistorical invention that reifies the social world imagined by our 19th-century foreparents’ (Richardson 2000 p.924). Instead she claims that:

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Although we usually think about writing as a mode of 'telling' about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable. (Richardson 2000 p.923)

For her, writing should not be confined to 'writing up' but should be a method of discovery. In the course of this thesis, I have made a number of experiments to this end. *All at Sea* is one example, as is my fictional writing. In addition, there are other occasional experiments in which I have explored playback theatre through different writing styles. These appear sparingly in the text. Although I have not always felt confident to write in this way within a doctoral thesis, on reflection these experiments have been very valuable in scrutinising playback theatre.

Interviews

I have interviewed a number of playback practitioners during the course of this research. In 1998 I visited Australia and met with the Perth, Brisbane, Bellingen, Sydney and Adelaide playback companies. I spoke to company members together and also met with individuals. In 2002, I attended training at the School of Playback Theatre in New York and met and interviewed Cyril Alexander from India. The transcripts of these interviews, made in my notebook at the time, are not analysed systematically, but have been used to exemplify and to stimulate analysis.

The literature

The literature on playback theatre largely remains confined to three substantial books. The following publications have been my main sources in

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identifying playback theatre discourse. In 1993, Jo Salas's *Improvising Real Life: Personal Story in Playback Theatre* was the first work published on the subject, this was followed by Jonathan Fox's *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre*. In 1994, a collection of essays appeared edited by Jonathan Fox and Heinrich Dauber, entitled *Gathering Voices: essays on playback theatre*. In addition to these works I have made considerable use of *Interplay*, the newsletter of the International Playback Theatre Network, first published by Jonathan Fox in November 1990. This bi-annual publication was later edited by Deborah Pearson and Robyn Weir in Australia; at the time of writing I have been its editor since December 2002.

Because of this relative lack of literature I have also drawn upon authors who represent disciplines which bear similarities to playback in the sense that they also involve the telling and enactment of autobiographical material. I am thinking here of the work of Jacob Moreno, Augusto Boal, and the dramatherapists, Phil Jones and Sue Jennings. Their work has been particularly helpful in identifying the 'constitutive otherness' (Cahoone 1996 p.16) that playback has established in its practice and discourse.

Finally, as key points of reference, I have found that 'post-structuralism' as represented through Jacques Derrida, and the 'anti-foundationalism' in the work of Richard Rorty (1999) have been rich sources for critical analysis. Notably, Derrida's reflection on the way in which the metaphors of 'structure' and 'presence' suggest a 'centre' beyond the play of signification, has been vital in providing me with the critical analytical tools to

investigate playback discourse and to explore alternative ways of conceptualising what is taking place in the practice.

Multiple subject positions.

Shulamit Reinharz (1997) argues that we not only *bring* selves to the field and but we also *create* selves within it; methodological literature does not fully take those selves into account. Yet they require acknowledgement since they provide valuable material. Pat Caplan writes

I have become aware that being an ethnographer means studying the self as well as the other. In this way, the self becomes 'othered', an object of study... (1993 p.172)

For the purposes of this thesis, I prefer the term 'subject positions' rather than 'selves' since 'subject' more evocatively suggests the anti-essentialist position I wish to take up. The problem with evoking 'self' or 'selves' is, as Rorty explains:

The very idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature – one which the physicist or the poet may have glimpsed – is a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation, the work of someone who had something in mind, who Himself spoke some language in which He described His own project. (in Waugh 1992 p.186)

I want to suggest in my use of 'subject position', a site (Hawthorn 2000 p.325-6) always located as Lyotard puts it a point in '...a fabric of relations' (1984 p.15). I am proposing the use of multiple identities in rendering the research:

...identities formed in and around our social locations, identities evoked in the field, identities created as a result of the interaction between our data and our selves, in and out of the field, experience-near and time-distant. (Lincoln and Denzin 2000 p.1060)

Such a strategy is more likely to convey the polyphonous nature of playback performances. In describing 'reflexive autoethnography' Ellis and Bochner give an indication of the process:

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angled lens, focusing outwards on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations. (2000 p.739)

The appearance of such subject positions in this text is designed to disrupt any sense of stable, authoritative truth in the analysis of playback theatre. It is hoped that the reflexive strategy of employing multiple subject positions will undermine the 'God's-eye view' (2000) of the omniscient researcher and so reveal the work as '...historically, culturally and personally situated'. (2000 p.1028). It is also more likely to reveal the means of representation being employed in the *research field*. In playback theatre the teller's narrative is exposed to the different subject positions of the performers. This process, I will argue, undermines any finalising authoritative 'take' on her experience. Although I do not claim a direct correspondence between method and field here, I do propose that through such a strategy it will be more likely that '...the language of inquiry [will] correspond to the expression of the phenomena being studied.'

There is, however, the risk of a sort of infinite regress in this approach. The logic of my argument would suggest that there is no final irreducible voice. Each subject position could be further deconstructed. Inevitably, some simplification and compromise has been necessary in defining these subject positions. The acts of reflexivity proposed rely on the reader accepting them as 'authentic' accounts - as 'conscientious' attempts to render the phenomena

(Gergen and Gergen 2000). Rather like the performers in a playback enactment these positions are *responses*, not acts of replication.

In the following table I have set out the particular subject positions that are given voice in my thesis. I have adapted the categories suggested by Reinhartz (1997 p.5) to order the different subject positions and accordingly I use 'research-based', 'situationally-created' and 'brought' subject positions'. Research-based positions are those generated through the act of research. Situationally-created positions emerge from being engaged in the field; and 'brought' positions are those that are acknowledged as being brought to the field by the researcher.

I will use the term 'voice' to denote the characteristics possessed by a particular subject position. Each of these positions will be identified through consistent typographical and presentational conventions.

The subject position	Definition	Voice	Presentational Conventions
a) Research-based positions.			
The 'academic'	The main 'organising' voice heard throughout this thesis.	Aims for an 'objective', authoritative tone. Aims to take a position 'outside' the argument. The voice of silent authorship (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997)	Ariel 12pt No boxes or borders (as used above).

The 'writer'	The 'writer' reflects upon the writing task, particularly in relation to his position as playback performer.	A voice of the thoughts and feelings evoked by the research. Catches the voice of the writer reflecting upon the study in relation to his position as playback performer/ensemble member/apologist for the practice.	Trebuchet MS 12pt In box
The 'novelist'	An attempt to render playback theatre through fictional means.	A fictional account of a playback rehearsal. Written in the third person.	Courier 12pt In box
b) Situationally-related positions that emerge from being engaged in the field.			
<i>The 'performer'</i>	<i>The position of the playback actor</i>	Written in the present tense in order to suggest live reportage. The description of the experience of the author as playback performer	<i>Georgia 12pt Italics In box</i>
<i>The 'reflecting actor'</i>	<i>The actor reflecting upon his past</i>	Written in the past tense to suggest reflection upon the acting. <i>Aims to add an</i>	<i>Ariel 12 pt in italics. In box to right</i>

	<i>work</i>	<i>additional perspective and to draw upon memory of performance.</i>	<i>side of the 'performer'</i>
The 'teller'	The 'teller' of personal stories in playback rehearsals	Accounts of my personal stories told in rehearsal. Designed to analyse some the dynamics of telling and watching playback enactments.	Verdana 11 In shaded box
c) 'Brought' subject positions			
<i>The 'apologist'</i>	<i>The 'insider' to playback; performer, company member and 'committed believer'.</i>	<i>The believer in playback theatre as a powerful medium for change and personal validation.</i>	<i>Trebuchet 12pt Italics In a box</i>

Table Two (A table specifying the different subject positions used in the thesis)

In the following pages I will exemplify the use of these varying subject positions.

a) Research-based subject positions: the researcher as storyteller.

All we sociologists have are stories. Some from other people, some from us, some from our interaction with others. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are

produced, which stories they are and how we can put them to honest and intelligent use in theorising about social life. (Silverman 1993 p.111)

Research involves the telling of a story. Paul Atkinson (Atkinson 1990) writes of the 'ethnographers tale' as often being presented as story of a quest or a journey of discovery. The 'story' of this research will largely be spoken through the '*academic*' voice. The '*academic*' will organise and filter the material. Being aware of the primary audience for this work – the academic community who will submit it to judgement – the '*academic*' needs to be the dominant register. It is a complex register, which organises, criticises and evaluates material. It is, in some traditions, the voice of 'silent authorship': 'Scholarly writers have long been admonished to work silently on the sidelines, to keep their voices out of the reports they produce' (Charmaz and Mitchell 1997 p.193). The silence is powerful: it suggests authority and distance from the argument. Eric Mykhalovskly writes of the scholarly 'heritage' that:

...includes a commitment to rationality, objectivity, and subject/object as well as other dualisms, all often subsumed in the notion of an autonomous masculine academic subject or voice (1997 p.233)

If the strategy of my method is to succeed, however, this voice will need to be undermined – or, at the very least, interrupted. If, with Roland Barthes, we accept that a text is '...a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (in Gergen 1993 p.106), then it is the task of the academic voice to open up this 'multi-dimensional space'. Rather like the conductor in playback the '*academic*' facilitates the expression of different subject positions.

The 'writer'.

An encounter with research is also and always a personal one. The voice of the *'writer'* needs to be heard. The story of the researcher is 'partial'. I take this word from the writing of James Clifford and mean it in both senses as both 'committed' and 'incomplete' (1986 p.7) My work is *committed* to both playback as a form and to the people with whom I will work. Therefore, values need to be acknowledged, since I would strongly assert that 'hygienic research' (Stanley and Wise 1993:114) is problematic, because as Ben Agger writes

The seeming avoidance of values is the strongest value commitment of all, exempting one's empirical claims from rigorous self-reflection and self-criticism. (in Kleinmann and Copp 1993 p.48)

The work will also be 'incomplete' in that I can tell only a 'partial truth', limited as I am by my personal lacunae, perceptual sets and cultural assumptions. 'Is there not a liberation' Clifford writes, '...in recognising that no one can write about others any longer as if they were discreet objects or texts?' (1986 p.25)

It is particularly important that the voice of the *'writer'* is heard when he is both participant and 'apologist' for the subject of the research. This subject position catches the voice of the writer reflecting upon the study in relation to his position as playback performer/ensemble member/apologist for the practice. Consider the 'reflexive moment' on page 23 of *Chapter One* or the following extract which illustrates both the complexities of the researcher's motivations and a possible use of the researcher's partiality. The viewpoint I refer to is that the playback actor is required to reveal him or herself in the

enactment. The playback actor in some way must, in the eyes of some practitioners, play himself.

The 'writer':

This is a viewpoint [that actors must reveal themselves] for which I have a great deal of sympathy. I am aware of many times in which it has felt that I have revealed something of 'myself' in portraying the teller's story. Or at least I have made use, for example, of experiences of depression, neurotic anxiety, loss or the joys of parenthood. [...] I am also aware, however, that claims for the actor's authenticity rely upon particular notions of the self and of 'actorly presence', which will need some critique. To this extent I find myself in an uncomfortable position, since interrogating these ideas of authenticity and revelation expose me to the risk of 'losing my footing' as a playback performer. I confess to a fear that such an examination may lead me to destroy the beliefs that sustain me as an actor and make playback theatre such an important part of my personal and professional life.

An ongoing struggle is evident concerning the impact of research on my relationships with playback practitioners and with my beliefs concerning playback. Research can be a bracing and unsettling exercise, exposing fondly held beliefs and values to inspection and this is certainly the case in my work. However, the feelings described of 'betrayal' in the previous chapter and 'losing my footing' here may also shed light into the nature of playback itself. It suggests perhaps that the form has a significant ideological component – that

'believing' in playback is part of what is involved in practising it. This has led me on to an investigation of those beliefs.

I would argue as Margaret Vickers does that such 'autobiographical acts' incorporate 'emotional truths, even while inevitably distorting events and experiences' (2002: 609). In writing with a personal voice, however, I recognise it needs to be constantly modulated by other voices and I ascribe to the words of Reinharz when she writes:

...documentation of these processes does not constitute an unwarranted, narcissistic display. Quite the contrary: understanding the self in fieldwork releases us from the epistemological tension between unreflexive positivism, on the one hand, and navel gazing on the other. It will help us document how and why the self is the key fieldwork tool. (1997: 18)

The 'novelist'.

Playback enactments, like the stories that prompt them, are, to some degree anyway, fictions. This is not to deny their truth-value but rather any inference of a direct replication of what they purport to represent. In a similar way, as Clifford Geertz (1973) and James Clifford (1986) argue, the problems of 'writing culture' always, to some degree, result in fictional creations. As Clifford writes:

Even the best ethnographic texts – serious true fictions – are systems or economies of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control. (1986:6)

The blurring of fact and fiction and the recognition of the deep subjectivity of the 'writer' is perhaps one central characteristic of late twentieth-century thought (Kearney 2002). Edmund Morris's biography of Ronald Reagan (Morris 1999) is an interesting example of the willingness to employ the fictional as a means of accessing material. Morris merges fictional and real life

characters to enable the reader access to events in Reagan's life that would otherwise be unavailable. This is a strategy which I will sparingly employ in the thesis. It has enabled me to convey something of the phenomenology of playback performing and has worked to 'condense' and exemplify ideas derived from practice. Of course, such a strategy cannot constitute evidential proof of my arguments; rather it serves as illustration and elaboration. The voice of the '*novelist*' will be employed to provide insight into the phenomenological experience of being engaged in playback. In the following example, Rona, the main character, offers to tell a story during her company rehearsal:

The novelist:

'I've got a story!' shouted Rona as she moved toward the storyteller's chair. She had to move quickly otherwise someone would get there before her. She was determined to tell a story this week since, over the last few rehearsals, she had missed out. Either she did not think of one or one of the others got there before her, but tonight she was going to make sure. She landed on the chair, skidding as she did so from the speed of arrival, and waited for one of the company to sit on the chair next to her. Laura joined her and said,

'So what your story, Rona?'

The truth was that Rona had been in such a rush to get to the chair that she hadn't totally decided. She hoped that

when she got there it would be clear what she wanted to say, and now, with Laura and the whole group waiting, she experienced a moment of panic. 'I'm wasting people's time' she thought to herself.

'It's about my father' she said finally.

'OK' said Laura 'Choose someone to be you'

Rona looked at the line of four actors sitting on chairs in front of a rack of coloured cloth. Who would she choose to play her? As her eyes moved along the group she was drawn to Bridget. It was something about the way she was sitting in the chair, slightly slumped as if pressed down by some force, a tension in her face and, unlike some of the others, not looking at Rona. It was likely, Rona thought, that Bridget did not want to be chosen, but there was something about her vulnerability, her reluctance, that drew Rona to say, 'Bridget'. Bridget stood up.

b) Situationally engaged subject positions: the researcher as performer.

'The performer'.

Peggy Phelan (1997) recognises the impossibility of recording performance. Having established that the critical characteristic of performance is its ephemerality (put succinctly in her maxim 'representation without reproduction'), she writes:

Rather than describing the performance event in 'direct signification', that task I believe to be impossible and not terrifically interesting, I want

this writing to enact the affective force of the performance event again... (1997: 11-12)

Phelan's notion of 'performative writing', in which the writer seeks to mimic the 'pulse' or the affective force of performance, is interesting to me because of the recognition of the possibility of writing playback performance itself. It seems that the phenomenological experience of theatre – the multi-sensory, contextual, relational, environmental being-there – is impossible to accurately record or preserve. Her notion of 'performative writing' seems to offer hope of a way of writing about performance that conveys some of its phenomenological tone. Of course, as she is quick to point out, performative writing is not new - it has always been present in good critical writing on performance - nevertheless, it offers a conceptual tool for the writer wishing to convey performance.

Like playback performers, writers face the problem of translating the untranslatable. They are aware that in any attempt to translate there will be inevitable and significant loss and abridgement. They both face a criticism that they have 'missed the point' and that people will say afterwards 'That's not the way it was'. In the face of the profound subjectivity, rapid decay and distortion of memory, writers, seeking to record the performance event, are faced with insurmountable problems of recording. Like performers, writers face the accusation of interpretative bias.

The task seems an impossible one. Is it possible for the writer to enact the rhythm and pulse of the performance or to find the beat that sounded through the original performance? If that is possible then the writer becomes a performer and style and content can be matched.

The 'Performer'

I listen to the teller. I do not know what do. I do not know what will happen next. I listen to my body, my emotions, the here-and-now relationships in space and the actions of the other actors. I do not just listen to the manifest words but I also respond to the physicality of the teller, the tone of delivery and the impact this has on me. I try to be aware of the internal stimuli that will impel me to action.

To what extent can we speak of the researcher apprehending the research field in this way? The actor does not just listen to the manifest words but also responds to the physicality of the teller, the tone of delivery and the impact this has on the actor's physical, affective and cognitive awareness. As an actor I am aware of internal stimuli that impel me to action. These stimuli are often inexplicable to me at the time and it is only in their realisation and embodiment that I make sense of them - if, indeed, I ever do. An idiosyncratic technique I employ is to 'breathe in' the story. As if 'inspiring' will lead me to inspiration. I mention this only to emphasise the non-cognitive aspects of the actor's activity and note in passing the possibility of apprehending the research field in this way.

There are two points I wish to make here: firstly, the importance of the personal awareness of the researcher. Stanley and Wise stress this in their argument for radical feminist research when they write:

...all research must be concerned with the experiences and consciousness of the researcher as an integral part of the research process. (1993 p.58)

Secondly, the playback actor will be aware not just of the spoken word but also of other sensory input received from the teller. Is it possible to conceive of research that engages all the senses? A researcher writing ethnography must, it seems to me, record what is seen, heard, touched, smelled and tasted (Okely 1994). Okely in writing about her work with gypsies expresses what I wish to say:

The anthropologist writer...draws on the totality of the experience, parts of which may not, cannot, be cerebrally written down at the time. It is recorded in memory, body and the senses. Ideas and themes have worked through the whole being throughout the experience of fieldwork. They have gestated in dreams and the subconscious in both sleep and in waking hours, away from the field. (1994 p.21)

To what extent can we regard the researcher and writer as engaged in improvisation? Janesick, employing her dance metaphor, proposes that there is a tension in good research between the 'minuet' (defined and precisely choreographed) and a dance improvisation. The qualitative researcher, she suggests '...may learn from the choreographic forms of both minuet and improvisation' (2000 p.383). The voice of the playback '*performer*' is accessible through my own work with Playback Theatre York. In the following passage I try to maintain the 'pulse' of the performance - the vivacity of the lived experience of playback acting. The teller has recounted his experience of a manic depression and his subsequent recovery with the help of his friends and family.

The performer:

.... when the performance begins, I use the feeling of my feet firmly set on the ground as a starting point and the impulse for further action. As I concentrate on planting my feet, I am aware of how difficult it is for me to feel balanced, to find the poise and steadiness that, I imagine, is characteristic of dancers.

I begin to lose my footing. I career across the stage, over-balance - nearly fall. I am pushed by other actors. I am lost in these movements. I hope that the others will find a way to change the pace.

Eventually, I fall to the ground, exhausted. I feel empty. I kneel, breathless and stare vacantly into the audience. One of the actors drapes cloth over me.

The cloth and the 'concern' of the others cover me - protect me. I recoil from it, wanting to be left alone.

Gradually, and carefully, the other actors lift me to my feet and surround me. I have an image of a sapling, surrounded by older, more deeply rooted trees, which hold and stop me from blowing over. .

We turn to the teller.

Our eyes meet. I feel from the teller as sense of recognition – a brief intimate moment of contact. A blurring of identity....

Like the playback actor the researcher needs to resist the temptation to force meaning but instead allow it to emerge from a deep immersion in the material and the experience of the research field. Another way of putting this

is to say that the researcher requires a willingness to relinquish some control over the process. As Kleinman and Copp write, 'Qualitative researchers only gain control of their projects by first allowing themselves to lose it' (1993 p.3).

I have found it useful to combine the voice of the 'performer' with that of the '*reflecting actor*'. The following example is taken from an open public performance staged by Playback Theatre York in Helmsley, North Yorkshire, in May 1997. The teller described receiving a phone call from her mother to say that her younger brother – of whom she was very fond – had had a panic attack in his exam, which he was then unable to continue. She describes the difficulties of trying to comfort and encourage her brother over the phone. She wanted to see him immediately but he was in Dublin. I was cast as her brother.

<i>The performer</i>	<i>The reflecting actor</i>
<p><i>Claire lays a blue piece of cloth diagonally across the stage. I move downstage left and stand still. I hear things behind me, but I don't know what is happening.</i></p> <p><i>I remove my glasses and say, 'I cannot see'. Blindly I look out to the audience. The actors wind white elastic around me. A black piece of is wrapped around my ankles.</i></p>	<p>I was unclear how to use the blue cloth, but I had an idea that if I placed myself at one end of it, it might act as the space between the teller and her brother. Only now as I write this am I consciously aware that it could be the Irish sea.</p> <p>I was blind, I am very short-sighted and could see little.</p> <p>I wanted to keep the image still</p>

<p><i>Hold the moment!</i></p> <p><i>The actor playing the teller is across upstage right. She pulls the end of the elastic – that gradually pulls me around to face her across the blue cloth.</i></p> <p><i>She throws out the elastic to me. I miss catching it. She throws it again and again. Eventually I catch it.</i></p>	<p>for a moment.</p> <p>This and the subsequent throwing of the elastic helped me. It structured what would happen next. The blue cloth, the diagonal and the elastic shaped the narrative.</p>
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The ‘teller’

Playback theatre companies rehearse through telling and then enacting their own autobiographical stories. The ‘teller’ catches the voice of the experience of telling and spectating in playback rehearsals. However, a note of caution – it is the voice of the ‘insider’ teller. It cannot speak of the experience of telling at a performance for the first time. Nevertheless it will be useful in exploring some of the issues of memory, personal exposure and ethics in playback. During the time that I have been working on this research both of my parents have died. As a member of the company I have told my story of their death and watched it ‘played back’. As a researcher I have reported on this and allowed it to shed light on the playback process. For example, the next chapter begins with a description of an enactment of the story I told of the day my father died.

In this example, I had told a very personal story during a playback theatre rehearsal that left me feeling over-exposed and

vulnerable. The notes made subsequently - and set out here - led me on to a personally valuable consideration of the ethics of playback theatre and the motivations of the teller.

The 'teller'.

Through telling the story I am over-exposed. I over-stepped my own privacy. Revealing what, at that moment, was not safe to reveal, I opened a wound, perhaps to appease them, to please them or to be seen by them - and then I could find no way to close it. One of the other actors said to me, 'People will only tell stories that they feel safe to tell' Is this true? Is it not possible that tellers will find themselves stumbling into saying more than they wished to say, or more than they had expected?

c) Brought subject positions:

Researchers need to acknowledge their own positioning. I bring to this study the roles of an English, Caucasian man, a father, a husband, a friend and colleague to members of Playback Theatre York, a son, a son bereaved, a man with a history of boarding school education, a lecturer, an enthusiast of playback theatre, the 'believing insider' or '*apologist*' with a rhetorical voice. All these positions will inevitably inflect the writing, it is the last one, however, that receives the most space in the following pages.

My personal and professional commitment to playback theatre and to Playback Theatre York is a fact of this study. Ethically and epistemologically this needs to be acknowledged. The '*apologist*' appears in this study to give

voice to that commitment. Here, for example is a section from an acknowledgment of my position with regard to the ensemble.

The playback apologist speaks:

- *An ensemble that has worked together for some time is more likely to present good quality playback theatre.*
- *Playback eschews a 'star-system' - in fact a desire for personal aggrandisement is contradictory to the playback process.*
- *In order to perform effectively playback actors need to maintain clear, honest and robust communication between each other.*
- *Playback companies need to spend time attending to the relationships within the group in order that this communication is fostered.*
- *Nevertheless playback companies are performing companies not sensitivity groups and a balance needs to be found between the internal dynamics of the company and the disciplines of playback performance.*

It is clear that there are significant methodological problems in 'writing playback'. Its ephemerality and profound recording problems give the writer major difficulties. What is required is an approach that acknowledges the main subject positions available to the playback performer and remains sensitive to the research field itself. My examination of researching playback has developed out of the reflexive interplay of field and method. Holding the research task and playback theatre in simultaneous awareness has provided

me with an active precept to judge the quality of my work and to guide me through the inevitable 'cloud of unknowing' that characterises the writing task.

Chapter Three

The Heart of the Story

...a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and tries to live his life as if he were recounting it. (Sartre 2000 p.61)

...the supreme achievement of memory is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the wandering and suspended tonalities of the past'. (in McConkey 1996 p.271)

The 'teller'

The Red Coat

In September 1998 my father died. With my mother and two brothers, I was at his bedside through the last hours of his life. As his breathing became more laboured and we wiped away the foam that kept gathering at his mouth, we talked about his life and, in clumsy ways, spoke about our feelings towards him. It was the first time we had all been together without partners and children for over thirty years and I was aware of the old battles, long forgotten, but still capable of animating and distorting the relationships between us.

Dad died slowly, but seemingly without pain. Over the last hour he seemed to stop breathing many times and then would take one further breath - something that I remembered from my nursing days to be called 'chain-stoking'. The gaps between these breaths gradually lengthened until finally he was silent. My mother held his hand and with a look of terrible and unbearable pain, asked each of us where we thought he was now. Struggling for some sort of answer, but refusing to repeat some neat formulaic answer, I said, finally, 'I don't know'.

After a short while, I went downstairs to see how my seven-year-old daughter was and to tell her that my Dad had died. As I walked outside into the quiet residential street I saw Rebecca in the distance on her bicycle, easily visible in her red coat, which seemed radiant in the bright sunshine. A neighbour stood across the road, smoking, I went over to him and asked him for a cigarette. He lit it for me, being, for a moment, the father that I had lost. Together we stood smoking watching Rebecca's exuberance - the scintillating redness of her coat against the deep blue sky, the sharp late September air brightening the image.

I told her that 'Papa' had died and asked if she would like to see him. She said she would and we went upstairs. She sat on my knee, by his bedside, holding me tight as we talked about what had happened.

I wrote this passage in March 2001, two and a half years after the death of my father. By coincidence it was written on the day of my daughter's tenth birthday. Having written it, I went to collect her from school with a feeling of calmness, almost of completion. For a moment I felt better disposed towards the world.

The autobiographical narrative and playback theatre.

Stories are ubiquitous in playback theatre; indeed, the autobiographical narrative and its dramatisation give playback theatre its organising focus. This chapter is devoted to the 'personal story' and its characteristics, as they seem to emerge in a performance. The aim of this chapter will be to destabilise the notion, often present in playback discourse, of the 'essence' or the 'heart' of the teller's story. I will propose that such a conception suggests an 'essential'

story existing beyond mediation and contingency, a story which, in some way, could be replicated or mirrored by the performers in their enactment. It will be my proposition that this is a misleading position from which to conceptualise playback theatre because it denies the relational, negotiated and context-rich nature of playback performances. It also fails to recognise that the past is, to a large extent, created in and for the present; and so, if the story has an 'essence', it is a fluid and dynamic thing caught up in 'the game' of signification.

In this chapter I will discuss the complex relationship between memory, narrative and the self. I will propose that the veracity of autobiographical narrative is inevitably inflected by the need for coherence, intelligibility and reparation of the past. As seems clear from *The Red Coat*, the relationship between what might be called the 'experience' of the teller and the story he tells in the performance to the conductor raises profound questions relating to the nature of memory and its representation. I will argue that it is not possible to maintain the position that there is a direct correspondence between the experience of the teller and the narrative they tell. What we must conceive of is a cumulative process of mediation that perhaps begins with the experience (as I sat at my father's bedside I was already developing the first 'drafts' of the story) and extends onwards through subsequent 'tellings' to (and after) the enactment. Playback theatre can be seen, then, as intervening in and inflecting this, perhaps endless, process of mediation. Such a conception requires us to re-think playback. The often-used exhortation to playback performers to play 'the heart of the story' is thrown into question if we adopt the relationship between experience and its representation advanced in the

following pages. Rather than viewing the performers as capturing the 'essence', we must see them as entering into the complex processes of what Annette Kuhn (1995 p.107) calls 'memory work'.

It will be proposed that the performed, co-authored personal stories told in a playback theatre performance may be considered a 'text'. A text that raises questions about its authority and its relationships to other texts – in other words its 'intertextuality' (Kristeva 1980). It is important to make clear at this point that I do not mean a 'dramatic text' here. If playback theatre performance can be said to produce a 'dramatic text' then that text is constituted by the complex interplay of the teller's narrative, the dramaturgy of playback brought to bear on it, and the particular inflections that result from its particular location.

Furthermore, if we are to reject the notion of the essential story then we must also re-think the view of the self that is implied by such a formulation. The essential story contains within it an assumption of the transcendent – and so, ultimately non-relational – self. These usually implicit and taken-for-granted assumptions are bundled together, as it were, with others that regularly appear in playback discourse such as authenticity, the presence of the actor and, as I shall consider later in this chapter, the privileging of orality.

The re-thinking of playback performing as a response to, and an intervention in, the teller's ongoing narrativisation rather than as a replication of some essence of their story is further strengthened by the proposition that playback theatre stories are particular sorts of narratives that derive from the means of their production. It is not possible to regard stories told in playback theatre performances as existing independently of the act and location of their

emergence. It will be proposed that these playback theatre stories emerge through a complex process of dialogue between teller and conductor and what's more that they are told within, *and* with a view, to performance. Such an argument recasts playback stories as contingent and context-dependent entities embedded in complex interactions. The delivery of the teller's narrative is performative in the sense that it draws attention to, and is inflected by, the circumstances of its telling. It is marked by '...the torsion, the mutual perversion, as one might say, of reference and performativity' (Parker and Sedgwick 1995 p.3).

Before commencing these substantive arguments I wish to establish some 'working definitions' of such key terms as 'experience', 'events', 'narrative' and 'text'. To do so will both establish the complexity of the process of the construction of autobiographical narrative and provide some consistency over the terms used throughout the rest of the thesis. It would be wise to sound a note of caution. They should not be read as stable, incontestable entities but rather as 'working definitions' that serve the purposes of this thesis. Although I present these in chronological order from experience to narrative there is no implied assumption or implication that narrative, necessarily follows experience. We could argue, as Mattingly does, that:

narratives are not primarily after-the-fact imitations of the experiences they recount. Rather the intimate connection between story and experience results from the structure of action itself. (1998 p.19)

a) Experience

This term will be used to designate the teller's experience that gave rise to the story. Since experiences reported in playback performances are in the past, one can usually assume that there was an actual, lived episode to which

the teller is referring more or less indirectly. This assumes, of course, that the teller is reporting 'truthfully', in the sense that the recounted experience actually happened. I do not mean to suggest that this experience is of a stable or recoverable nature, as Wyatt writes: 'The past cannot be said to be. Instead we should say rather the past is made whenever it is reconstructed' (1986 p.196). This past experience is incommunicable except through some symbolic form – usually linguistic, but, increasingly, since the advent of photography and film, also visual.

b) Events

This experience is structured into what we shall call '*events*'. The term '*events*' corresponds to what the Russian Formalist's called the '*fabula*', which for the novelist, is the '*...raw material awaiting the organising hand of the writer*' (Selden and Widdowson 1993 p.34). In using the term '*events*' we shall be referring to both psychic and physical events. This distinction between '*experience*' and '*events*' has the virtue of allowing for the acknowledgement that experience can only be reported through processes of representation.

To report events most usually involves a process of emplotment (except perhaps in such communication as '*free association*'), no matter how elementary. For example, a teller might recount feeling depressed, going to visit a friend and returning home feeling much improved. A simple, linear, chronological plot clearly has been imposed. I shall reserve the term '*story*' for this '*sequence of actions or events, conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse*' (Culler 1981 p. 169-70). I will consider narrative to be '*the actual discourse that recounts the events*' (Mattingly 1998 p.34).

c) Narrative

In this thesis I shall be adopting the definition suggested by Onega and Landa (1996) who view narrative as '... a semiotic representation of a series of events connected in a temporal and causal way' (1996 p.3). The 'teller's narrative' will be considered to be the representation of their story in the particular circumstances of its telling. This will be assumed to include the events described and the way in which the teller plotted those events. It will include verbal, para-linguistic and gestural aspects of the teller's contribution. We should not consider this story to be a reified entity but, instead, regard it as inflected by the means of its production. Of course in employing the term 'the teller's narrative' there are problems in suggesting that it belongs to the teller since the dialogic relationship between teller and conductor, as we shall see, puts into question the teller's ownership of that narrative.

The complexity of this task is compounded by the observation that at least three types of narrative occur in a playback theatre performance. The first is the teller's narrative referred to particularly in this chapter. The second is the 'dramatic narrative' created by the performers. The third is the occasional use of spoken narrative employed as a particular theatrical device by a narrator/performer. In order to distinguish these, the first will be referred to as the 'teller's narrative', the second will be termed 'the dramatic narrative' and the third 'the actor's narrative'.

d) The Text

Playback theatre is, as Jonathan Fox writes, non-scripted theatre – that is to say it does not develop out of work from a previously written text. One

might consider the teller's narrative to be a 'dramatic text' since it is the raw material that guides the enactment. In fact the discourse of playback practitioners often suggests that we should see it in this way. For example, by using such phrases, taken from the lexicon (*Appendix Two*) as 'being loyal to the teller's story', 'capturing the teller's truth', there is a suggestion of an authoritative text which the performers follow. If we are to speak about 'dramatic text' in playback theatre we need to take into account the teller's narrative *and* the specific dramaturgy of the genre. It is the complex interrelationship of the teller's narrative and the dramaturgy of playback theatre (the process of conducting and the dramatic forms employed to *receive* and portray the story) that comprises the playback text. This conception of playback's dramatic text has the virtue of allowing a consideration of the complex processes of intertextuality that are at play. An understanding of intertextuality will, therefore, be crucial in conceptualising the playback process.

Homo Faber: narrative and the self.

It was a stormy night in the Bay of Biscay and his sailors were seated around the fire. Suddenly the crew said, 'Tell us a story, Captain'. And the Captain began; 'It was a stormy night in the Bay of Biscay...'
Ciaran Carson, Fishing for Amber: A Long Story. (in Kearney 2002 p.1)

In the last quarter of a century there has been an increasing interest in the autobiographical narrative and its function in conferring coherence, intelligibility and identity. This has been apparent within psychology (Sarbin 1986; Bruner 1990), philosophy (MacIntyre 1985; Polkinghorne 1988; Kearney 2002) and in psychotherapy (Toukmanian and Rennie 1992; Brooks 1994; McLeod 1997).

Personal stories in public places: an investigation of playback theatre.
Nick Rowe. March 2005

The notion of 'Homo Faber' or the 'motivated storyteller' (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995) may, perhaps, be best introduced through the work of the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre. In *On Virtue*, MacIntyre is concerned with the 'liquidation of the self into a set of demarcated areas of role-playing' (1984 p.535). Instead he posits, '...a concept of self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end'. (1984 p.536).

He argues that it is 'natural' to think of the self in narrative mode and that narrative is 'the basic and essential genre' for the characterisation of human action. For MacIntyre this privileging of the autobiographical narrative is an ethical imperative – it is the task of placing the individual's idiosyncratic accounts at the centre of philosophical analysis. He goes on to propose that narrative provides the primary means through which human beings achieve 'intelligibility'. He also argues that we imagine ourselves as characters in a story whose identity is formed through the creation of narrative. He writes '...personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the character which the unity of the narrative requires'. (1985 p.548).

Narrative is, according to MacIntyre, the organising principle of human identity. Human beings are, from this point of view, on a 'narrative quest' for intelligibility, identity and teleological closure. The problem in this conception seems to be the danger that narrative becomes reified, a structural and organising progenitor of the self. This would lead us into the same problems that accrue if we maintain the notion of a transcendent self. I would agree with Greimas when he writes 'Narrative structures do not exist *per se* but are a mere moment in the generation of signification'. (1991 p.293)

Autobiographical narrative structures are provisional and dynamic; they are drawn into the process of remembering and constituting identity. They are perhaps best seen, as Barclay suggests, as improvisational acts in the fluid creation of subjectivities or, as he calls them, protoselves. He writes:

...autobiographical remembering is largely an improvisational act. Accordingly, the improvisational activities that are characteristic of autobiographical remembering – for example, ongoing justifications of fleeting feelings in and between people – create *protoselves*, or remembered selves in the making. (1994p.70)

Lyotard's conception of the contemporary self is similarly a dynamic and evanescent one. He writes that the self

...does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. A person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits...Or better, one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. (1984 p.15)

In this conception, the self is not transcendent, nor has it vanished into Baudrillard's hyperreality (Baudrillard 1983); rather it is, as Holstein and Gubrium argue, '...first and foremost, a *practical project* of everyday life' (2002 p.70). The self is a constant and ongoing project of self-construction and 'reparative reconstruction'. The self is not passive in this process. As Lyotard writes,

No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that transverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent. (1984 p.15)

The self is not merely a 'sea of images' (in Holstein and Gubrium 2002 p.61), but is engaged in the pragmatic exercise of constituting itself within the discourses and actions of quotidian existence.

Reparative reconstruction.

The 'teller'

The past is unrecoverable; the events that I describe at the opening of the chapter can only ever be the traces of an event. The last hours of my father's life, recalled so much later, cannot reclaim the lived experience. What remains are visual, acoustic and linguistic images - the red coat, the brilliant sunshine, the white foam that gathered around his mouth, the sound of his last breath, the strange phrase 'chain stoking', which seemed so appropriate to a man not adverse to 'chain smoking' and who had been brought up in smoky pre-war London.

From these images a narrative has been created and refined over time. It is a narrative told many times, which has gradually formed into a shape that somehow carries the existential weight of that time for me. I am reminded of what David Powley, one of the members of the York Playback Theatre Company, said about a story told in a playback theatre performance we were discussing. A story he said is 'a ship that carries us across a sea of pain'. Or, as Cox and Theilgaard (1987 p.24) write of metaphor, it is able to 'carry the existential weight' of loss. Annette Kuhn puts this well when she writes

Although we take stories of childhood and family literally, I think our recourse to the past is a way of reaching for myth, for the story that is deep enough to express the profound feelings we have in the present. (1995 p.1)

The 'teller'

As soon as my father died my task was one of 'remembrance'. Not only to remember, and so to commemorate him, but also to find a way to invest the bare events of his dying with significance – a significance fitting to mark the death of a man on whose knee I sat to watch *The Lone Ranger*, and whose thumb was exactly the same shape as mine. The events of that Sunday in September do not seem enough for me; they need to be infused with something more. They need poetic images, a narrative – a shape that gives me pleasure and even a sense of being at rest.

This is my story, it marks who I am; I was there, and this was *my* father. My story is ground on which I can stand and on which I cannot be easily contradicted. This narrative, which undoubtedly will be endlessly rewritten, identifies me - as much as the similarity of my thumbs to my father's thumbs does. In writing this story and telling and retelling it, am I not engaged in what Mark Freeman calls 'rewriting the self'? The psychoanalyst, Thomas Wyatt writes:

All my memories are unmistakably *my* memories. The feeling 'that was I' is simply a central and inalienable part of them. That is where continuity resides. (1986 p.198)

The task of remembrance establishes a sense of the continuity of self. This continuity for Wyatt is '...as much a *reparative reconstruction* as it is an elementary condition of remembering' (1986 p.199). Intense anxiety may occur when this sense of continuity is thwarted and the past appears

fragmented into a disparate series of events without coherence. One might argue that the act of remembering, particularly through narrative is, to borrow a phrase from the psychoanalyst Murray Cox (1978), a 'compromise with chaos'. It may be considered as an attempt to bring coherence to the disordered, topsy-turvy nature of experience and so 'author' the self as continuous and unified. In writing this story of my father's death, two and a half years after the event, I continue a process of 'reparative reconstruction', a process that began as soon as he died (if not before) and which, I imagine, will continue into the future. One might argue that each rewriting of these memories further fictionalises the memory, replacing the inchoate flux of the experience with a 'workable' personal myth, capable of carrying the affective weight of that time and, in some way, commemorating my father.

Jerome Bruner recognises the reparative function in the creation of narratives by proposing two forms of cognitive functioning. These he characterises as 'the logico-scientific mode' which '...attempts to fulfil the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation' (1986 p.12). This mode, he suggests, employs categories and concepts in a search for consistency and non-contradiction. It aims for 'good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, sound argument and empirical discovery guided by reason and hypothesis' (p.13). He contrasts this with the mode of 'narrative knowing' that leads to '...good stories, gripping drama, believable (...) historical accounts' (p.13).

This second mode of knowing is distinguished firstly by its 'inherent sequentiality'. He proposes that the rules of narrative creation and reception require attention to the ordering and structuring of events. Secondly, narrative

is somewhat indifferent to what is 'imaginary' and what is 'real' and so it has a structure that is 'internal to discourse' (Bruner 1990 p.44). In other words it has rules that do not, necessarily, depend upon veracity but are rather more dependent upon the internal demands of the narrative. Finally, reminding us of MacIntyre's 'wild duck' example, Bruner tells us that narrative has the ability to render 'the exceptional and the unusual into a comprehensible form' (1990 p.47). In making this distinction between logico-scientific and narrative modes of knowing, Bruner calls for the psychological disciplines to study what he calls 'folk psychology', whose 'organising principle is narrative rather than conceptual' (p.35). He is interested in the narrative structuring of experience and its importance in providing a sense of continuity and meaning.

Poetry drugs the dragon of disbelief.

These processes of remembrance serve the present and future as much, if not more than, the past. Raphael Samuel puts it succinctly when he writes that '...the past is the plaything of the present' (Samuel 1996 p.429). Furthermore, for this task of remembrance to be achieved, the precise veracity of the narrative is not the priority. For example, when I showed this passage to my wife, she told me that Rebecca's coat was pink rather than red, albeit a very bright pink. Perhaps surprisingly, this does not destroy the efficacy of the narrative for me. The vivacity and the 'passion' of 'red' is what is required for the story. On the borderline between life and death, the colour must be red – pink will just not do.

It is clear that we cannot rely on any naive notion of a direct correspondence between primary experience and autobiographical narrative.

Must we, therefore, treat personal story with scepticism, as being closer to fiction than fact? Must we condemn the autobiographical as mere anecdote? As Bruner (1990) has argued this has been the often-undeclared strategy of academic psychology throughout the period when behaviourism and later behavioural-cognitivism held sway. The veracity of memory, of course, has always been regarded with scepticism in psychoanalysis, which looks for the evasions, the resistances, the repressed and the symptomatic in the patient's recollection of the past. Recognising, as Michael Ventura does, that 'memory is a form of fiction' (Hillman and Ventura 1993 p.22) does not invalidate it. Rather it recasts memory as '...an interpretative act the end of which is an enlarged understanding of the self' (Freeman 1993 p.29). As Annette Kuhn writes:

As the veils of forgetfulness are drawn aside, layer upon layer of meaning and association peel away, revealing not ultimate truth, but greater knowledge. (1995 p.5)

'Memory work' then, may deepen an understanding of self and other. As can be seen from my *Red Coat* story, it involves a 'rewriting of the self' that looks as much to the future as to the past. As Mark Freeman asks, are autobiographical narratives not '...rooted in a kind of faith, in what it might mean to live well - a faith that, however labile and transient, we cannot live without?' (1993 p.49)

According to Donald Spence the task of the therapist becomes one of enabling the patient to achieve '...a kind of linguistic and narrative closure' (1982 p.137) in which the therapist becomes more of '...a pattern maker than a pattern finder' (p.284) engaged in an '...artistic struggle' (p.294). He approvingly quotes Isenberg, '...poetry drugs the dragon of disbelief'. (p.269).

Peter Brooks (1994) asserts that there is increasing agreement that psychoanalysis is a 'narrative discipline'. He writes that the psychoanalyst concerned with enabling the patient to arrive at:

...a recomposition of the narrative discourse to give a better representation of the patient's story, to reorder its events, to foreground its dominant themes, to understand the force of desire that speaks in and through it. (1994 p.47)

This notion of psychopathology as being a 'dystoria' (Roberts 1999) in which the task of the therapist is to enable the patient to rewrite their narrative has become an influential one amongst psychotherapists in the last two decades. It has, one might argue, emerged out of the crisis of the metanarratives to which Lyotard (1984) refers. It marks a foregrounding of localised subjectivity and an interest in the ways in which human beings seek intelligibility, teleological closure and personal identity. It is clear that this stress on personal story in playback theatre has been deeply influenced by this climate of opinion. Furthermore, as I will argue in the *Chapter Five*, one could make a plausible case that one of the aims of the playback enactment is to understand the force of desire that speaks in and through the story.

The creation of autobiographical narrative involves a loss. Because 'narrative truth' conforms to its own needs for 'good form', coherence, intelligibility and closure (Abbott 2002), it will always have a tendency to omit or edit out that which cannot be held by it. Narrative is always a compromise with the inexpressible. Narratives are purposeful acts; they are designed to convey something. In doing so they often omit that which is not immediately relevant. I did not, for example, recount in *The Red Coat*, the drawing of an army officer on the wall of my father's bedroom, which evoked so strongly in me a sense of 'cruelty' that I attribute to the army life that I was immersed in

as a child. I did not do so because that was part of another story - a story of old battles, long forgotten, but still capable of animating and distorting relationships in the present. This was not the story I had chosen to tell.

The 'teller'

The story enacted

The Red Coat was written some two and a half years after my father's death. It seems to have performed an act of remembrance in the course of my bereavement but it is also a story that was partly shaped by telling the story of my father's dying day at a playback rehearsal in early October 1998 – only weeks after the event itself. I had arrived at the rehearsal uncertain whether I was emotionally ready to perform but very keen to tell my story. I told the actors about the red coat and cast Susanna to be Rebecca. This actor, swathed in red cloth, circled the stage throughout the enactment, making a very strong impression on me, to such an extent that this is now the only part of the enactment that I remember. It is clear that the performance altered my memory of the event, or at the very least, pushed to the foreground the red coat aspect of it. Subsequent retellings have always stressed that aspect, arguably far more forcefully than would have been the case if I had not viewed that performance. I would contend that this has altered my narrative, giving me an image that previously did not have the resonance it now has. It is clearly the case that the performance has, amongst other things, contributed to the fictionalising of one aspect of the story – literally reinforcing what I later discovered to be fictional – that the coat was pink and not red. But, of course, she is also caught up in this process and since

the coat is no longer available, its colour is subject to the inflections of memory.

The Oral Tradition and Playback Theatre.

The basic idea of playback is an aesthetic one, that the beauty can hold the most difficult truth and make it possible for us to see. That's what art can do. Playback theatre is part of the oral tradition. Stories live in our memories and our hearts. (Fox and Sperling 1999 p.151)

Fox claims that that one of playback's defining characteristics is that it belongs within an oral or non-literary tradition (1994). While accepting his term 'non-scripted theatre' as being an accurate description of the improvised nature of playback, I want to argue that the notion of the oral tradition (and especially the implication of a nostalgic 'return' to it) contains assumptions of the pre-eminence of the oral and an unsustainable binary opposition between the oral and the written which ultimately produces a conservatising, nostalgic dynamic in our understanding of playback that does not convey the complexity, vivacity and polyphony of telling on the playback stage. I will propose that the although Fox's understanding of orality does allow for some of this, essentialist assumptions of 'presence' eventually block a sense of the dialogic, performative, highly reflexive processes involved in the telling of personal stories in playback.

Playback theatre enactments do not proceed from a written text but rather from a narrative 'told' largely in oral form. I say 'largely' because, of course, the performers are also aware – consciously or otherwise – of the gestures, mannerisms and posture of the teller and, in my experience, these will inform and inflect the enactments.

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Drawing particularly on the work of Albert Lord (1965) and Walter Ong (1982), Fox argues that playback theatre is 'a 'new' oral form of theatre'. Perhaps inspired by Walter Ong's notion of 'secondary orality', in which he claims that a new oral culture is sustained by the proliferation of verbal communication through radio, telephone and television, Fox considers orality to be a constitutive property of playback theatre. He employs the distinction between the 'oral' and the 'literary' as a device to carve out a particular identity for playback theatre, a strategy that perhaps partly derives from a need to establish playback's otherness in relation to the more visible and, one could argue, more dominant, literary theatre.

Fox uses, as his main reference point, the work of Walter Ong entitled *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (1982). In his analysis of oral cultures, Ong describes their properties of expression and communicative style in order to convey and emphasise their qualities of copious excess. He argues that the nature of oral expression leads to an 'additive' style in which meaning is built through adding sentences in layers. He gives as an example the first few verses of Genesis in which meaning is built through addition and repetition. He goes on to suggest that oral cultures tend to use 'aggregative' rather than analytical expression. He writes that people in oral cultures prefer '...not the soldier but the brave soldier, not the princess but the beautiful princess' (1982 p.38). In addition because the spoken word disappears as soon as it is uttered the listener can easily forget, so the oral culture tends towards the repetition of words, phrases and themes.

Ong builds a picture of expression in oral cultures that is excessive, repetitive and multi-layered rather than what he considers to be the analytical,

linear nature of expression in highly technical 'literary' societies. Oral cultures are, to Ong, 'close to the human life world'. This is a key theme picked up by other writers (Lord 1965; Roskiel 1995). It is based on the claim that print cultures '...distance and in a way denature even the human'. (Ong 1982 p.43). Oral culture, for Ong, is 'situational', rather than 'abstract'. By this he means that its forms of expression remain close to the tangible world of the teller and listener. Ong develops this further by stressing the somatic component of orality. Spoken words, he writes, 'are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body'. (p.67). He emphasises the 'interiority of sound': for him, sight, as the primary means of apprehending the written word, 'isolates' whereas sound 'incorporates'; sight distances and 'dissects' whereas 'sound pours in to the hearer' (p.72).

Before the means of recording sound became available, oral expression was also close to the world of the listener, and so Ong argues that it was 'empathic and participatory'. In *The Singer of Tales* (1965) Albert Lord points out that for the oral poet the 'moment of composition is the performance' (Lord 1965 p.13) and there is no gap between composition and performance. He goes on to suggest that the implications of this are 'broad and deep'. The claim here seems to be that in oral cultures the story is composed within performance, and is profoundly inflected by the relationship between teller and listener. Ong puts this another way: he argues that writing is a 'solipsistic' activity, in which the audience is always a 'fiction', whereas orality is a communal one. However, it is important to question the assumption that such communal forms of expression are necessarily 'democratic' – one

needs only consider the Nazi Nuremberg Rallies to appreciate the rhetorical power of oral expression can be deeply manipulative.

Ong is aware that expression in oral cultures tends to be 'conservative' and 'traditionalist'. The spoken word is the primary means through which the 'wisdom' of the society is passed on and this, Ong suggests, 'inhibits intellectual experimentation'. He writes that 'narrative originality' in oral societies 'lodges not in making up new stories but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time' (p.42-3). In this sense oral expression has similar qualities to the notion of 'ritual', another concept prominent within playback discourse. When employed in playback discourse orality and ritual tend to refer to something lost through industrialisation, technology and bureaucracy. When bundled together with other such words as 'the elders' and 'service' such terms tend toward an essentialist, metaphysics of presence (Derrida, 1974 p.212) that denies the reflexive complexity and multi-valency of telling in playback performances.

Fox's analysis of the oral tradition depends (as does Walter Ong's) on a comparison with the 'literary style':

...literary culture champions succinct, thoughtful, original treatments; it discourages the mesmerising effect of performance; it champions objectivity – intellectual and aesthetic distance; it favours the specialist and the professional. (1994 p.25-26)

However, the creation of such an oral/literary binary presents problems. The notion that oral expression brings us close to the 'living world' is one that needs examination. Writers who promote the value of orality seem to stress the importance of a 'living voice' and a 'living presence' and the 'sacred'. As Fox writes, 'In the oral world ...the word has a sacral air' (1994 p.17).

He proposes that the oral tradition has an 'affinity to the natural' (p.55). There is a sense in which oral expression, for Fox, is somehow closer to the living and lived world than the written. Jacques Derrida argues that what he calls this 'phonocentrism' derives from a notion that, '...the voice, producer of the first symbols, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind' (1974 p.342).

Derrida argues that there is an assumption in Western culture that the written is separated from the mind through the technical and the representative – it is clear that playback's affiliation to orality suggests such an assumption. Derrida questions this 'strange privilege of sound in idealisation' (p.343) arguing that it is closely related to the metaphysics of 'presence'. He writes:

...phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as *presence*, with all the subdeterminations which depend on this general form and which organize within it their system and their historical sequence. (p.343)

Writing has been debased, he argues; it has been 'considered as mediation of mediation and as a fall into the exteriority of meaning' (p.343).

It is Derrida's argument that this privileging of the spoken word over the written serves the purpose of maintaining the fiction of the pure, self-transparent and integral subject and that such a strategy suggests a means by which humans can be known to themselves, outside the play of signification. It is an assumption that is suggested by Fox's use of such phrases as 'sacral air' and 'close to the natural', in the sense that concepts of sacredness or the natural lead us, perhaps inevitably, toward a conceptualisation of a transcendent entity beyond human intervention and

mediation. We are being pointed, as it were, away from the mimetic, to the Ideal forms that lie outside Plato's cave.

It may be that the binary opposition between a literary and oral style has served, for Fox, as a polemical device to carve out a space for the actor of the 'non-scripted theatre'. However, I would argue that it fails to take into account the dialogic, relational, performative and mediated nature of playback stories (and indeed perhaps all autobiographical stories). I suggest that more dynamic conceptualisations of what is happening when personal stories are told in playback performances is needed.

Autobiographical narratives in playback theatre performances.

Narratives told in playback theatre performances are forged by the circumstances of their telling. They do not arrive as autonomous entities ready and complete, to be delivered in the performance. They are inflected by context, the dialogue between teller and conductor, by the fact that they are performed in the presence of an audience, and by their tendency to draw upon other texts.

To explore this further I offer a verbatim account of a story told during a performance of Playback Theatre York to drama students and staff at Chester College in 1999. In fact it was the performance that followed the rehearsal at which I had told *The Red Coat*. Because of my 'raw' feelings, I chose not to perform at that event and so I had the opportunity to record in writing the dialogue between the teller and the conductor as it was spoken. It is not an exact transcript but was written out in full after the event. The vignette has been chosen because it illustrates the complex, reflexive and dialogic

characteristics of personal narratives told in playback performances. We find the teller concerned about the impact the telling may have upon the audience as he remembers the effect the telling had in the earlier drama workshop. The particular kind of public place created here — a student/staff group known to each other located in a familiar college venue — may have played a part in producing a story that reflexively draws attention to its effect upon the listeners. A group of students and staff may be highly aware of the impact their words are having and how that might affect their continuing relationships. In any event the sense of guilt that the dream provokes and reveals heightens the levels of reflexive awareness and performativity in the telling.

The dialogue takes place between the conductor ('C') and a male teller ('T') in his early thirties.

The Dream of Murder.

The Conductor asks the teller to choose someone to play him. He chooses B.

C. When did this story take place?

T. A long time ago. Well it is about a dream that I had about a year ago - no more like six months ago. Although the dream is based on something that happened in real life.

C. Tell us something about you at the time of the dream.

T. I was enjoying the first year as a mature student. I had transferred from English and Computer Studies to Drama and I was really enjoying it. I had a lot of energy. I told this dream in a drama workshop and people were terrified by it. I'm worried I might terrify the audience.

Before the dream, about 10 or 12 years before, when I was perhaps (I'm giving away my age here) 23. I was in Reading where I had been a student and happened to be reading the newspaper, I came across a small article

about a friend of mine and it said that he had committed suicide. I was really shocked and it was worse because our friendship had not ended on good terms. After that I couldn't get him out of my mind, I saw people in the street who looked like him ...someone who had the same haircut or clothes and I thought it was him.

C. Choose someone to be your friend.

T. Could the actors choose someone?

C. I would prefer you choose.

The teller points to A.

C. Tell us about your friend

T. He was called David. He was wild.

C. Are you wild?

T. I'm a tempered version of him. He looked like me. We had a close connection.

C. A close connection. OK. Tell us about the dream.

T. It is the middle of the dream. I can't remember the beginning. I know in the dream that I have killed him. I know what it is like to kill someone. I pull out my jumper from the washing machine - it is covered in blood.

C. How did you feel?

T. I feel remorse and terror. I could commit murder. I remember that we did not part on good terms. I woke up shocked. It is with me now. I know what it is like to kill someone. I am worried. I have the inside view of a murderer.

C. OK. This is T's story of a dream. You watch.

It is clear that the teller's narrative is not totally under his 'control'. Firstly, the events emerge through the conductor's questioning. For example, the conductor asks such questions as 'When did this story take place?' or 'Tell us something about yourself at the time of the dream'. It is clear that the events are evoked in dialogue with the conductor. Secondly, the plot is co-authored between the conductor and teller. For example, the conductor's question 'Are

you wild?' introduces the possibility that there is some mirroring between the teller and 'David' and so plots into the narrative inter- and intra-psychic dynamics that were not previously explicit. Therefore, as Bakhtin argues:

Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the effect of an interaction between speaker and listener produced via the material of a particular sound complex. It is like an electric spark that occurs only when the two terminals are hooked together' (1994 p.35)

Bakhtin's insights are important for us here since, for him, meaning does not emerge in the 'personalist' (1984) sense that 'I own meaning' – a concept that is 'deeply implicated in the Western humanist tradition' (Clark and Holquist 1984 p.9) in which the individual can control and have ownership of the meaning they wish to create. Bakhtin argues that meaning is created in dialogue and so 'I cannot own meaning, but only do so in dialogue with others'. An acceptance of his ideas has a profound effect on the way that playback theatre is conceptualised. It brings into question the notion of the teller as an independent self-transparent originator of meaning and questions the possibility of the independence of their story. Instead of a story 'owned' by the teller, the playback theatre story becomes not only a jointly created text but also a text that is created in relation to other texts –an 'intertext'.

Following the work of Barthes (1967) on intertextuality, Kristeva's reading of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on the dialogic and the 'languages of heteroglossia' led her to develop further the notion of intertextuality – one that has proved enormously fruitful in literary studies. Bakhtin stressed the dialogic nature of all human communication and had argued that '...all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup' (1981 p.428). Kristeva developed this further, asserting that any

text is '...constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (1980 p.66). A text therefore, may not be understood as a hermetically sealed unit existing independently of other texts. Instead we must conceive of complex fields of interrelationships in which texts always 'refer' to other texts. Roland Barthes asserts that

The quotations from which a text is constructed are anonymous, irrecoverable, and yet already read: they are quotations without quotation marks. (1979 p.77)

This 'loosens up' the notion of text to such a degree that we must conceive of any text as an 'open dynamic playground' (Cancalon and Spacagna 1994 p.1) in which allusion, unacknowledged quotation, pastiche and complex associations are at work.

This notion of intertextuality renders the position of the author problematic. He or she can no longer be regarded as having a single, unitary presence. The authority of the author and the attempt to search for his or her intentions and motivations is considered by Barthes to be a project not only condemned to impossibility but also inclined to impose single, stable meanings to texts. As he famously writes,

We know now that a text is not a line of words, releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. (1989 p.116)

The search for the author behind the work becomes a futile one and the refusal to assign a single, ultimate meaning becomes, for Barthes, an 'anti-theological activity' and a 'truly revolutionary one' which refuses 'God and his hypostases - reason, science, law' (1989 p.116).

This clearly places the teller's narrative in playback theatre in a different light. We must now regard the teller's narrative as a complex matrix of signifiers and codes, which refers, quotes and alludes to other texts. It follows that the authority of the teller and the attempt to reveal 'essences' or ultimate meanings becomes deeply problematic. Once we have relinquished the notion that the narratives told in playback are independent entities owned by their tellers and unaffected by the nature of their production then we may begin to see them as negotiated and contextual creations.

There seems to be a tension in playback discourse between an understandable and ethically driven wish to capture 'the heart of the story' and be 'loyal to the teller' on the one hand, and a recognition that stories are created in performance contexts on the other. This tension seems to be apparent in the following email correspondence I had with Jo Salas.

The 'writer':

My discussion here is coloured by an episode at a workshop led by Jo Salas, in which she forcibly and overtly criticised my acting during a short enactment. It was with a sense of anger, confusion and humiliation that I asked for the email correspondence. She felt that I had been unacceptably interpretative in my acting and this stimulated a discussion concerning the role of the conductor and actor in playback. In retrospect I suspect my anger prevented me from appreciating her argument.

In her correspondence with me in February 2001, Salas had been maintaining that the kind of 'psychological interpretation' present in therapy (that she had criticised in my acting) was unacceptable in playback, she wrote:

Often in a therapeutic context, the client has deliberately placed trust in the therapist to the degree of agreeing that she or he will accept (or at least try on) the therapist's view of reality--it is the therapist's perspective and wisdom which the client has sought and paid for. But when a teller comes to the chair, she has not relinquished power in the same way. She is there as a co-creator. (2001)

She then goes on to suggest that, in one particular episode during the course – not one in which I was directly involved – the process of 'co-creation':

...almost broke down, because the conductor, out of her nervousness, failed to hear *the essence* of her story. Fortunately, the actors had been listening carefully and were able to *reflect* the story for the teller, at least to some degree. *The meaning or essence* of the story was contained in T's narrative: *it did not need construction* by the actors, only distillation and expression in action. (2001) [My emphasis].

What is interesting here is the apparent contradiction between the 'co-creation' suggested in the first passage and the uses of such terms as 'essence' and 'reflect' in the second. If, as Salas argues (rightly, I think), the story is co-created then it is difficult to understand what essence is being heard by the conductor and what the actors reflect for the teller.

I replied:

The difference between the therapy room and the playback performance is not so much one of power but one of audience and intent. In playback the teller is speaking in the presence of an audience and this is bound to profoundly influence the way in which the story emerges. For example, the story that emerges would be very different if told to a close friend or indeed in the privacy of therapy. This is compounded by the fact that the story is told to a conductor who is paying attention not only to the story but also to the needs of the performers and the audience. This must be shaping the production of the story. Could we say, therefore, that in a playback performance we get a '*playback story*' - a particular kind of story, influenced profoundly by the nature of its production? This does not diminish the story - but rather recognises the way in which it is produced. And anyway can we

ever speak about a story as having a life independent of the act and context of its telling? (Rowe 2001)

Driven at the time by a need to contradict Salas, perhaps I failed to recognise that her points are not as contradictory as they first appear. From a cooler and more detached perspective, one could suggest that an unacknowledged paradox lies behind them: that the right to self-definition of the teller needs to be acknowledged and respected while simultaneously recognising that it is constantly being renegotiated in relationship with conductor and audience. One could argue that such apparent incommensurables dynamise the playback event. Few tellers would be prepared to contribute their stories if they felt that they were just grist to the mill of the conductor's and actors' playful interpretations, but neither would it be so interesting if the teller's narratives were so hermetically sealed that they could not be prised open for negotiation within the playback process. Salas's 'contradiction' reveals a dynamising tension in playback theatre. It is a tension that is energised by the performative quality of telling autobiographical narratives in public places.

The Performance of the Playback Narrative.

The autobiographical narratives in playback emerge both as a performance and *within* a performance. This is clear in *The Dream of Murder*. The levels of reflexive awareness are complex. The teller tells of a dream; his response to that dream; his memory of the last meeting with his friend; the impact this particular dream on the 'drama workshop' and, perhaps, the impact the telling is having on this audience.

The dream 'shocked' the teller and as he says, 'It is with me now'. The dream works in a complex relationship with the teller's memory of his last meeting with his friend that had 'not ended on good terms'. Despite the shock of the dream and the impact it had when he told it previously, he still decides to tell it here. The teller is clearly aware of the impact this story of the dream has had on others in the workshop and he may well be anticipating the impact it will have on the present audience. Gergen writes '...as narratives are realised in the public arena, they become subject to social evaluation and resultant moulding' (1993 p.222). If performance is always *for* someone, as Carlson suggests (1996), then the teller is, in playback, performing for those assembled, for him or herself and, perhaps, for those who are absent but who, in some way, have a significant relationship to the story.

In *The Dream of Murder*, the teller begins with the dream and the effect that that has upon the people in the drama workshop and with his worry that this story might similarly terrify the audience. By doing this perhaps he seeks to heighten our interest and raise our expectations. By doing so he certainly introduces a certain *frisson*. This is heightened when later he concludes the story with the climactic: 'It is with me now. I know what it is like to kill someone. I am worried. I have the inside view of the murderer'. His statement - 'It is with me now' - has the effect of collapsing the distance between the dream and the present moment. If it is with him now then he is suggesting that perhaps it is 'present' to the whole audience. It is a rhetorical device aimed at heightening the tension. In following this with 'I know what it is like to kill someone. I am worried' he suggests that he may be struggling now, again bringing the dream closer to the present moment of telling. And then finally, 'I

have the inside view of the murderer' might be considered rather melodramatic. I would suggest that he has a keen appreciation of the effect he is having upon the audience. The recounting of the story is a highly self-conscious and reflexive act in which the teller has an acute awareness of the impact upon the spectators and the performers.

We may not only see the telling as a performance but also something that is taking place *within* a performance. That is it takes place *within* a performance and is, crucially, directed *towards* performance. Because of the ways in which the conventions of playback have been developed, the teller will usually be aware that the telling of his story will be followed by a performance. As is clear in *The Dream of Murder*, the casting of significant characters in the story will interrupt the narration. It is clear also that, by and large, the choices concerning whether to cast a character, or not, are ones made by the conductor. In the following passage, Salas writes about the purpose of these interruptions in the course of the telling. In doing so she reminds us again of the co-creational nature of the emergence of playback stories:

Soon after Carolyn starts telling about her dream, I stop her. 'Carolyn, hold on a moment. Can you pick one of the actors to play you in the story?'

My interruption has at least two functions. One is that my request immediately takes her story into the realm of co-creation with me and with the actors. From now on, as she continues telling, she - and the audience - will be picturing the action that is going to take place in a minute or two. The other purpose of my interruption is to convey to her that I am there to guide the telling of her story. It's a gentle assertion of the conductor's authority - essential for both safety and aesthetics. (1993 p.712-72)

It is clear from this passage that the role of the conductor in co-creating the teller's narrative is a crucial one. Salas suggests that it is the task of the

conductor to draw the story 'into the realm of co-creation' with the conductor and with the actors. It is, therefore, in one important sense, no longer, as it were, in the sole possession of the teller, but becomes 'raw material' (or more accurately 'cooked') for a performance. The teller is required to relinquish some control over her narrative in order that it may be shaped towards performance.

Deborah Pearson, an experienced playback conductor from Australia, takes the performative nature of the teller's narration in another direction by emphasising the role of the audience. She encourages conductors to place themselves so that they are as much in contact with the audience as with the teller. She warns against entering into an intimate dialogue with the teller that 'excludes' the audience. Speaking about the relationship between the teller, conductor and audience, she worries about the, '...propensity [of the conductor] to have intimacy only with the teller, so the audience is always on the outside'. In an interview in Australia in 1998 she explained this approach,

One of the things I have developed in my work ...is to try and unravel the story with the audience, so that when the conductor is working with the teller, she is having an ongoing dialogue with the audience. Not in a trite sort of way - like 'Who else has been to York?' - but real meaningful dialogue so that the audience can start to get involved in their own story rather than just be voyeuristic on the teller's story.
(1998)

Pearson's recommendations suggest that she is concerned with creating a transitive relationship between audience and narrator in which the teller's narrative will be inflected by the spectator's own identifications and, *vice versa*, the audience's own stories will be being 're-written', as it were, in response to the teller's. Her wish that the audience should not be 'voyeuristic

on the teller's story' calls for a level of dialogue which will, perhaps, permit multiple perspectives to inflect the individual narrative.

Performed narratives.

When personal stories are told in public places perhaps it is inevitable that narratives are inflected by the circumstances of their telling. Relinquishing the notion of the original story may enable performers to

...be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears ... Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs. (Foucault 2002 p.125)

Adam Phillips proposes that the alternative to believing in an authoritative, original version of the analysand's story is '...that there are just an unknowable series of translations of translations; preferred versions of ourselves, but not true ones' (2002 p.143). He goes on to argue that in psychoanalysis '...the only good translation is the one that invites retranslation; the one that doesn't want to be verified so much as altered' (2002 p.146). In psychoanalysis – and I would argue in playback theatre – one is not referring back to some original, but forward to a new translation: a new, but never final, version. The performative nature of telling in playback theatre opens up gaps and excesses in the narrative that evade representation and provide opportunities for the performers.

Chapter Four

The Dramaturgy of Playback Theatre: A very different kind of dialogue?

...instead of a process in which the drama leads to a discussion of mutual identification and awareness, a very different kind of dialogue takes place, indirect, multi-layered, remaining within the domain of metaphor. (Fox 1999)

Reality is a cliché from which we escape
by metaphor.

(Wallace Stevens cited in Montgomery, Durant et al. 2000 p.157)

In this chapter I propose that 'effective' playback theatre expands the polysemy and polyphony in the teller's story and opens up what I have termed *hermeneutic play*. When it is successful, playback 'loosens' the teller's narrative from unequivocal meanings. It exposes the teller's story to vertiginous, disorientating and, at times, parodic play. It releases the signifiers of the teller's narrative from their 'original moorings' and exposes the processes of interpretation and narrative construction that follow experience. It is this process which, I think, is behind the 'moments of danger' (see the lexicon, *Appendix Two*).

Having 'freed' ourselves from the requirement to view playback as a replication of an essential narrative we must find alternative means of conceptualising the process. Through an examination of playback's dramaturgy, I will propose that performers elaborate upon what is both said and *unsaid* in the teller's narrative, enter into linguistic and gestural play with it, condense some aspects of the story, stretch or dilate others and substitute

one 'set' of signifiers for others. This is certainly not a process of replication of the teller's story, but one of hermeneutic elaboration and expansion.

As I have already noted, it is with psychodrama that playback has its closest historical links. It is common, particularly in the United States, Australia, Germany and Japan, for playback companies to draw members from the psychodrama community. It is not surprising, therefore, that the boundaries between playback theatre and psychodrama are ones that have been most thoroughly explored.

In 1999 Jonathan Fox wrote a letter to the Moreno Institute, a psychodrama-training centre in New England, designed to carve out a separate identity for playback from the more established practice of psychodrama within the practice of the Moreno Institute. In it he identified two 'significant differences' between the two disciplines; these will form the basis and the structure of the forthcoming discussion. Firstly, Fox proposes that playback sets up 'a different kind of dialogue' – a dialogue that is characterised by less 'cognitive' and figurative forms of expression. In *Part One* of this chapter, I investigate what might be meant by 'a different kind of dialogue' and look at the use of the figurative in playback's dramaturgy.

Secondly, Fox proposes that the 'balance of power' between the teller and the performers is different in the two methods and so playback sets up a different relationship between the teller, her story and the enactment. Specifically, the teller in playback does not enter into the dramatisation in the way that is common and desired in psychodrama (Moreno 1987 p.14). This difference is a crucial and constitutive one that raises significant ethical issues for playback practitioners. This discussion will form *Part Two* of this chapter.

Part One

A very different kind of dialogue? Between telling and performing.

Fox writes:

Playback Theatre, with roots in an aesthetic tradition, is more right brain than psychodrama, relying more on image, movement and music, and less on words. This means that often in playback there will be no effort at cognitive insight, and we will enact another story rather than have sharing. Thus instead of a process in which the drama leads to a discussion of mutual identification and awareness, a very different kind of dialogue takes place, indirect, multi-layered, remaining within the domain of metaphor. (1999) [Fox's emphasis]

It may be presumed that by 'right brain', Fox means types of thinking that are holistic, intuitive, synthesising, integrating, emotional, interpersonal, feeling-based, kinaesthetic (Honey 1993) as opposed to those that may be considered sequential, rational and systematic. In proposing that playback has its roots in 'an aesthetic tradition' he implies that psychodrama has its roots in an alternative tradition. The most likely tradition to fit that bill, I would suggest, is a psychotherapeutic one. Setting aside the observation that that the psychotherapeutic tradition is also an oral one and so would surely conform to Fox's characteristics of orality, what seems to be implied is a tradition that is left brain, 'psychological' and highly cognitive in its interpretations. Salas sheds light on this when she writes about 'psychological interpretations':

Interpretation in the psychological sense means imposing one's therapeutic insight on the story; it is distinct from artistic interpretation, the filtering of the story through one's artistic sensibility, a process which is integral in playback. (1999 p.29)

This concern with imposing control through psychological interpretation or through 'cognition' is one that seems to have played an important role in

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establishing playback's 'otherness'. However, such binary oppositions as right brain/left brain or aesthetic/psychodynamic, whether stated or implied, present problems and are difficult to sustain. Maintaining an opposition, for example, between the aesthetic and the psychotherapeutic seems to depend on a process of 'fixing' stable (and inevitably incomplete) meanings for each. As Derrida (1976) points out, such a strategy implies that the one will always be dependant on the other for its existence, it will be 'haunted' by the other. A movement of 'différance' is, as Derrida tells us, '...the common root of all oppositional concepts that mark our language' (1981 p.8). It is a '...movement that consists in deferring meaning by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement' (1981 p.8). Binary oppositions deny the complexity of this process of 'différance'. They imply stable meanings that lie beyond mediation and, as such, their use in conceptualising playback will limit our ability to convey the play of signification within the form.

For example, consider the implication that 'words' reside within the realm of left-brain, cognitive thinking and that using 'fewer words' is more characteristic of right-brain thinking patterns. Such an implication is reminiscent of the way in which the notion of orality is used in theorising playback. There is in both examples a distrust of language as being limiting and over-defining. There may be some validity to this argument; however, it can potentially mask the complex movement of trope and the slippage of signification embedded in the structure of language itself. If we confine language to left-brain processes we deny, or at least undermine, the

possibility of making use in performance of words that '...will not stay in place. Will not stay still'. (Eliot 1959 p.17)

Fox is also arguing that playback differs from psychodrama in the way in which it proceeds from story to story. Playback does not usually give time for a 'discussion of mutual identification' with the teller's narrative or, more generally, for a process of what is often termed in psychodrama, 'sharing' (Holmes 1991 p.12). Instead playback proceeds to the next story with, some sense that, as Fox writes later in his letter, it '...is likely to provide a completion of the one before' (1999).

This section of his letter suggests a complex dialogue through which insights and meanings are explored through 'indirect, multi-layered' and metaphoric processes. Despite the problems that the use of binary oppositions gives us, Fox is making important points that are worthy of analysis. However, it will be important to reframe his approach. In the analysis that follows I will explore his assertions by examining, firstly, the contrast between the means of representation employed in the telling and in the enactment of a narrative. I will suggest that the effects of the juxtaposition of telling and dramatising is key in understanding the ways in which playback 'plays' with the teller's story.

Secondly, I want to examine the use of the figurative in playback enactments. I will suggest that the injunction to performers to work 'metaphorically' or 'non-literally' in the Playback Theatre York Company, for example, is better understood as an encouragement to use different means of representation and to proliferate, or allow, a range of differing subject positions. In other words, it is an injunction for them to work between and

beyond representation and to permit performative 'excess' (Kershaw 1999 p.66). Kershaw writes:

...much more happens in the performance than the production of signs, and it is precisely this experience of performative excess – which *includes* the signifying process – that ushers in the potential of the radical in performance. (p.66) [Kershaw's emphasis]

In this chapter I am particularly interested in how 'various realms of representation' (p.66) are used in the dramatisation of the teller's narrative with the effect of destabilising it and ushering in hermeneutic play. In later chapters, I will address the performative and non-referential dynamics of playback performance that 'evade representation' (p.66).

Contrasting systems of representation.

At its most straightforward the playback theatre process involves a contrast between two very different discursive modes – the 'telling/conducting' and the 'enactment'. The teller and conductor are, by and large, confined to representing the story through *verbal* means. The fact that the teller remains seated and the way in which he is conducted encourages him to render his story in verbal form. This is not to deny that the teller's non-verbal behaviour and paralinguistic inflections will not feature in the narration and inform the subsequent enactment. However, it is to claim that the primary means of telling will be linguistic. This, it will be suggested, is a key characteristic of the form since the structure of playback theatre performances juxtaposes very different means of representation. In doing so it aims to open up the audience's awareness of different symbolic systems that may be employed to convey personal experience.

It is also clear that the teller is actively encouraged to recount his experience through relatively *literal* means. It is the task of the conductor to gather the basic 'facts' of the story, to ask such questions as, 'Where does your story take place?' or 'What happened next?' It is also her task to ensure that there is enough information for the performers to work on. Di Adderley, a conductor with Playback Theatre York and the Manchester Playback Theatre Company, e-mailed company members and, in the context of encouraging inexperienced conductors to find the job manageable, wrote that the role was simply one of

...inviting stories, getting the 'when it happened, where it happened, who's in the story, what happened, where is the end of the story', then you've got enough to hand it over to the actors. Conductors do not need to think up clever questions - just get enough framework for the actors to work with. (2001)

Although it is the conductor's task to gather the 'framework' of the teller's story, this is not to say that his use of metaphor, for example, will be discouraged. The conductor will often use a metaphor given by the teller to explore his experience further. However, the conductor usually wants to 'ground' that metaphor in events from the teller's experience.

In addition to its largely verbal and non-figurative nature, it is also notable that the 'telling' in playback theatre performances takes place through 'a *dyad*'. In fact the intervention of any other person during this process is usually implicitly discouraged. For example, the actors very rarely intervene to ask questions or to seek clarifications from the teller. During a workshop I attended on 'Ritual and Playback Theatre' in May 1998, Jonathan Fox spoke about this being one of the 'rules' of playback, which contributed to its 'ritualistic' quality. Jo Salas supports this point of view:

...it is hard for the actor to resist the temptation to ask questions during the interview. You almost always feel that you don't have enough information. But you keep your silence, because you know how undramatic it would be to break into the delicate web of anticipation that is being woven. (1993 p.61-2)

One important exception to this dyadic relationship is when the conductor turns to the audience, during the telling, to ask if they share an experience with the teller. This strategy is, in fact, recognition of the exclusive, rather intimate quality of the teller-conductor relationship and is designed to break that intimacy and draw the audience into the telling process. As I shall discuss in *Chapter Seven* the similarities that the teller-conductor discourse bears to a therapeutic encounter has been one of the main grounds for questioning the ethics of the form. To some extent - and this will depend on the style of the conductor and the nature of the story told – the process of 'telling' in playback theatre performances will almost inevitably be suggestive of a therapeutic or even a confessional relationship and this will clearly shape the means by which the story is represented. During a Playback Theatre York performance to General Medical Practitioners and trainers in Harrogate in May 2002, for example, a teller spoke of his feelings of helplessness in the presence of the dying; the conductor asked members of the audience to raise their hands if they had ever experienced such feelings.

In contrast to the telling/conducting, the enactment that follows employs a far wider range of systems of representation on the one hand and a more complex 'framing' of the proceedings on the other. The enactment will include verbalisation, visual image, voice, music, dance and a range of theatrical conventions. This opens the audience to the different means of representing personal experience. I will suggest that it is the aim of the

enactment to foster this excess. I am particularly interested in means of representation that may attract the epithet, non-literal, non-naturalistic or figurative.

The literal and non-literal.

The preference for 'non-literal' portrayal of the teller's story is a dominant theme in playback theatre discourse. For example, Playback Theatre York stresses the importance of 'not being literal' and of playing the story 'metaphorically'. Also a criterion for successful playback is often considered to be the degree to which performers eschew a 'literal' performance. Frances Batten, an established playback theatre teacher and practitioner, told our company after watching us perform at the British Association of Psychodramatists Conference in April 2001, that the company 'were excellent at doing the non-literal' and went on to say that he encourages the groups that he trains to 'work metaphorically'. In another example, Jo Salas writes of 'serious mistakes' in some playback acting

Brand new actors in their innocence do not think of anything but the literal, while sophisticated actors know how to move fluently and clearly between the literal and symbolic action on stage. (1999 p.26)

Not surprisingly considering the difficulty of its definition, 'literal' is being used here as shorthand for a complex of ideas that guide performers. Stern (2000 p.43) suggests three uses of the term 'literal'. Firstly, as something that is clear and unequivocal and lacks ambiguity. Secondly, as implying the 'empirical' and 'factual', and suggests a certain epistemology in which a distinction may be made between 'the literal truth' and other, perhaps more

figurative or rhetorical, ways of speaking. Finally, it is common to use 'literal' to denote that which is precisely transcribed, copied or reproduced.

The distinction between the literal and its antonyms is difficult to maintain. Even the 'plainest' speech often relies on hidden or unacknowledged metaphor and metonymy. Richard Rorty tells us that the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical is the distinction 'between familiar and unfamiliar uses of noises and marks' (1989 p.17). He goes on to describe the 'career' of the metaphor

...it will gradually require a habitual use, a familiar place in the language game. It will thereby have ceased to be a metaphor – or, if you like, it will have become what most sentences of our language are, a dead metaphor. (p.18)

Any stable definition of 'literal' is, therefore, clearly problematic: firstly, because the term is used in very different ways; secondly, because it is very difficult to speak 'literally' without the use of trope; and finally, because its synonyms – such as plain, unembellished or truthful – often carry ideological and value-laden associations.

The use of the phrase 'literal' seems to be used as a shorthand in playback discourse to describe an enactment that is factual, unambiguous, lacking in symbolic or figurative devices and that may give a 'word-for-word or 'event-by-event' representation of events. As one member of the York Company said, in a 'literal' playback enactment, 'What you see is what you get'. A certain 'plainness' and a lack of the twists, turns, displacements and condensations of the figurative is implied. In playback the injunction to work 'non-literally' may simply be an encouragement to explore a range of theatrical and musical styles, genres and conventions. It is, I would suggest,

also about the wish for an excess or abundance of twists and turns that is called for when actors seek to 'portray the story non-literally'.

The effects of the juxtaposition of telling and enactment.

The juxtaposition of the limited means of representation of the 'telling/conducting' to the more abundant ones of the 'enactment' has, I propose, the following effects:

- a) It draws attention to the acts of representation, interpretation and mediation that takes place between the teller's narrative and the enactment. Indeed the differing symbolic systems employed by the performers in successful enactments present the spectator with a *montage* of styles and genres that may promote what Brecht called, in his *Threepenny Opera* notes, an 'exercise in complex seeing' (1979 p.129). We might say, as Brecht does when writing about Chinese painting that this means 'among other things very properly renouncing the total subjugation of the observer, whose illusion remains only partial' (p.138).
- b) This 'excess' of codes available to the playback performers emphasises the subjective aspects of the teller's story and explores alternative ways in which subjectivity may be represented. Playback's dramaturgy employs means of 'symbolisation' that bear some relation to dreams and unconscious processes as understood particularly by Freud (1995) and Lacan (1998).
- c) The 'abundance' of means of representation available to performers enables them to draw the teller's narrative away from its particular and idiosyncratic detail and so gives the audience and the teller an opportunity

to enter into closer identification with the story on the one hand and appreciate its wider contextual relationship on the other.

- d) The use of a range of theatrical and musical styles, genres and conventions to portray the teller's narrative will heighten the contrast between 'telling' and 'performing'. It is likely to cast the narrative in a rather more unfamiliar light. As Stern told us, the literal often refers to the 'familiar' or to the 'regularly used' and it, therefore, follows that the non-literal may partly be characterised as being that which is unfamiliar. The term *defamiliarisation* used by the formalist literary critics Viktor Schklovski and Roman Jakobson is relevant here. Christopher Norris writes of their view that

...the chief function of poetic language was to defamiliarise our normal (everyday or prosaic) modes of perception. This is achieved by deploying a wide range of linguistically 'deviant' devices – metaphor and metonymy, symbolism, rhyme, rhythm, meter, complex patternings of sound sense – in order to focus our attention more sharply on those devices themselves and also on the new-found possibilities of experience which they serve to evoke. (1996 p.139)

This list will require substantiation in the following pages; however, it is not my intention to deal with each claim in turn - this would compound the reductive problems that are always inherent in listing. One last comment needs to be made about my list. The reader may notice that there is an apparent contradiction between b) and c); that is, between the claim that an excess of codes leads to both a heightening of the subjective *and* a step away from the particularity of the teller's story. It is instructive to bear in mind the words of Quine who defined a paradox as producing

...self-contradiction through accepted ways of reasoning. It establishes that some tacit and trusted pattern of reasoning must be made explicit and henceforward be avoided or revised... [and that this involves]...

nothing less than a repudiation of part of our conceptual heritage. (in Honderich 1995 p.642)

It is perhaps not surprising that, in light of my thesis, paradoxes will appear which may involve some sort of 'repudiation of part of our conceptual heritage'. It may be that this apparent contradiction holds important insights concerning the playback process and this will need to be borne in mind as the thesis progresses.

The 'deviant devices': lost in a 'tropical jungle'

There can be a danger in going too far in the direction of abstract representation. Above all we need to see the story. If the actors launch themselves into the stratosphere of symbolic action, the essential particularities of the teller's story can get lost. The meaning of the experience can only express itself in the actual events of the story, where it happened, when, who was there, what did they do and say. (Salas 1993 p.61)

The following is the result of an 'immersion' in metaphor – a launch into the 'stratosphere' of the symbolic. Written in the middle of the night, following a dream in which I encountered a pool of disturbed, dirty and deep water. It also recalls *All at Sea* also written in the middle of the night. The following develops my metaphor in order to explore the functions of metaphor in playback theatre, and to bring together the 'worlds' of writing, playback acting and epistemology.

In 'The Retrait of Metaphor', Derrida (1998 p.103) argues that it is not easy, perhaps impossible, to speak about metaphor since to do so one must 'borrow', or make use of, metaphor. Aware of the 'drifting or skidding' that so easily occurs in writing of metaphor, and making clear that the speaker is not in control of metaphor like 'a pilot in his ship', Derrida writes

Therefore I ought to decisively interrupt the drifting or skidding. I would do it if it were possible. But what have I just been doing? I skid and I drift irresistibly. I am trying to speak *about* metaphor, to say something proper or literal on this subject, to treat it as my subject, but through metaphor (if one may say so) I am obliged to speak of it *more metaphoric*, to it in its own manner. I cannot *treat it* without *dealing with it*, without negotiating with it the loan I take from it in order to speak of it. I do not succeed in producing a *treatise* on metaphor which is not *treated with* metaphor which suddenly appears *intractable*. (1998 p.103)

The 'writer' immersed in metaphor.

In the dream the water is dark, deep and disturbed. I fear to enter it. When I awake I know that I have to do some swimming. I have been tiptoeing around the edges of this chapter, perhaps afraid that I may get lost in its deep waters. I need to enter these deep, dirty and disturbing waters. I want the reader to swim with me.

I could, of course, choose another metaphor. I could have invited the reader to 'travel' with me, to 'follow' or 'journey' with me. I choose the swimming metaphor, not because it is *intrinsically* better than any other, nor because it necessarily holds more 'truth' than any other possibilities. I choose it because it is mine. It has been forged – another plunge into metaphor – in the middle of the night in my dreams and it holds sense for me. Richard Rorty wrote the following of the human 'faculty for making metaphors':

By seeing every human being as consciously or unconsciously acting out an idiosyncratic fantasy, we can see the distinctively human, as opposed to animal, portion of each human life as the use for symbolic purposes of every particular person, object, situation, event, and word encountered in later life. This process amounts to redescribing them, thereby saying of them all 'Thus I willed it'. (1989 p.36-7)

The 'writer'

I ask the reader to swim with me, entering the waters without, perhaps, the safety of the life jacket of the 'literal' for reference. We may, of course, stay in the shallows, effecting perhaps a simultaneous translation, as it were – never allowing the metaphor to carry us away. Staying close to the shore/sure would be safe but it would perhaps be dull or, worse, superficial.

But here I begin to find that the metaphor is losing its force – or perhaps more accurately, I am forcing it to do a job for which it was not designed. If I go too far into it I would be lost. Rorty again:

Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways. A language which was 'all metaphor' would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just babble. (1989 p.41)

Perhaps that was behind Frances Batten's criticism of a Playback Theatre York performance, that we sometimes 'get lost and take refuge in metaphor'. There is a danger of becoming lost in the endless folds and turns (the etymological root of trope) of tropes – a 'tropical' jungle.

The 'performer'

I enter this tropical jungle; its strange exotic fruits, the myriad colours and gradations of light that play upon the leaves fascinate me. Beginning to forget why I am there (leaving the story far behind like the swimmer the

shore), I meet other actors. Together we play, enjoying the twists and turns that this jungle offers.

We might say that, under the spotlight, under the gaze of the audience we regress until – like children stopped in their play – we find a way to end, blinking from the harsh light of reality.

This happens in playback performances sometimes, usually when the actors have not listened to the story or the story is unclear or the story is not 'grounded' in real life events. This is surely behind the experienced playback performer Peter Hall's statement that effective playback maintains 'a tension between literal truth and poetic truth'.

The '*writer*' too can be lost. In a recent dream I am trying to find my way out of a row of large gardens, I can find no exit, I have to turn back and retreat. On awaking I think about my present work on this thesis and wonder if that was what the dream was referring to. But maybe, I think to myself, I should spend some more time in these gardens and not try to find a premature exit, a tidy formulation, perhaps, that will let me move on.

Epistemological fear and ethical concern.

Behind all of this lies the fear, touched by an exciting possibility, that there are no safe shores/'sures'. That it is just a question of choosing between more or less useful metaphors. There is no solid ground to which all tropes and figures ultimately refer. There is no sanctuary beyond the language game.

Personal stories in public places: an investigation of playback theatre.
Nick Rowe. March 2005

We can see playback enactments as an entry into a *tropical* jungle – a playful orgy of possible meanings, associations and references. This raises significant ethical issues. Are playback actors just *messing around* with the teller's story, throwing the pieces of the jigsaw in the air, scrambling its pieces, holding up one piece to the light for close inspection, totally ignoring other pieces – placing pieces together in ways that were not suggested by the original?

The discourse of playback suggests in its explanatory commentaries that there is a steady place beyond this play: it is the teller's story, to which the players must remain 'loyal'. That is the 'original' that will prevent the performers 'drowning' or being lost in 'the tropical jungle'. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, the teller's story is not free of the play of signification, rather, it is a network contingent upon associations, references to other texts, unreliable memories and the particular context of its telling.

The enactment that I describe next took place at a conference of British psychodramatists in June 2001. The performance was the concluding event of the conference and was designed as a 'closure' to it. The chosen enactment illustrates the actors' entry into the 'symbolic' (or the 'tropical' jungle), through their use of differently coloured pieces of cloth. The danger of getting lost was particularly acute in this enactment partly because the conductor and the teller, for reasons of confidentiality, were unable to inform the actors of certain elements of the story. It was clear later that a significant proportion of the audience were aware of these elements: this led to an uncertainty on the part of the performers and a degree of dramatic irony in the performance. I have

consulted some of the performers concerning this enactment and their comments are placed in square brackets with differing fonts.

The symbolic in playback theatre: the unexpected workshop.

The story.

The teller ('Mary', a pseudonym) described a workshop she had attended the day before, which had not been as she expected and for which she felt totally unprepared. She felt shocked and angry that the workshop was not being run as had been advertised. At the coffee break she sought support from another participant and described how she put 'armour' on to protect herself as she returned to the group. The workshop was different upon her return. The leader had decided to revert to what had originally been advertised. She recounted the anxiety she felt before going to the conference and how, in her preparation, she had decided to get what she wanted from it and to try and not be too anxious. She said that she wanted to change, to be less 'defended' – her experience of the workshop had not, she felt, helped her in this.

She cast Viv to play herself saying, 'I knew I wanted her to play me'. The conductor asked what it was about Viv that made her choose her and the teller replied that it was '...her stature, she looks safe and strong and she's a survivor. She looks like she has been through it herself'.

[Viv said later to me that she knew that she would be chosen and she was pleased. She said, 'I felt like I grew in stature a bit by being chosen.']

The Enactment

'Mary' began the action, carrying a large number of cloths, centre stage. She folded a piece of white cloth saying

'I will definitely need this' and placed it as if into a suitcase. She continued with a black piece of cloth,

'Yes, black and white, I will need these' and packed it into her 'case'.

'I know what I want to get out of this conference, I'm clear about that...'

Mary then picked up a blue cloth and said

'No, I don't think I'll take that!' She threw it aside. The audience laughed.

[Viv told me the following 'I had an instinct around her not being glittery. She chose me and I knew she would choose me. When she spoke about me, it was as if she knew me, and what I've been through. In my mind was a line that I thought I might use at some point and that was, 'a lot of surviving but not much thriving'. I remember a few years ago reading a book, which said something like 'Yes you have survived but have you thrived?' Because she chose me, this phrase was going through my mind and black and white seemed to me to be more about surviving than thriving. I didn't think of this at the time, but I went through a time a few years ago when the world seemed black and white and had no colour. I was chucking out the bright glittery colours here because, for me, survival seemed about black and white. She had a stark way of looking at the world. These cloths were aspects of her and how she operated and how she looked at the world.']

The 'writer':

Why did I feel tearful when Viv told me this? It was the integrity of her description and my own recognition of the way playback acting can be. It can be an encounter with one's own story through the teller's.

'Mary' picked up a roll of white elastic and wrapped it around her fist and gestured as if she were wearing boxing gloves. The audience laughed loudly.

'Mary' looked up at the audience and said,

'You think they're boxing gloves, don't you – they're not!'

[Viv told me: I had not intended that they would be boxing gloves. She had talked about armour and I thought the elastic would be useful, later – perhaps to wrap around myself, like we do sometimes! It was difficult to manage because it was all tangled up so I wrapped it around my hands and then became aware that the audience thought it was boxing gloves. They felt a bit like that to me too and I began to punch with them. I felt that the audience were close and involved with what I was doing and so I was telling them that they may be wrong in their assumption and, as Mary, I was saying, 'Yes, I may have armour, but I'm not going to fight.']

'Mary' continued to pack, she held up a piece gold cloth towards the audience wondering aloud if she should take it to the conference. She then turned it around revealing that on the other side it was black. She said 'Yes, I'll take this, I can always wear it inside out'.

Having clearly completed her packing, 'Mary' stood centre stage, alone with a pile of material in her arms and waited. After some time one of the uncast actors stepped forward saying,

'Welcome to the workshop, for the first part could everyone get their blue cloths'.

[Sarah told me: 'I had watched the cloths being packed or discarded earlier, there was a dim thought, not a prepared thing, about things being thrown away. I was aware that the blue cloth had been discarded and it was a "fragment" that I held on to. I knew something would come of it. The blue cloth was like a seed – this happens a lot in playback – someone throws out a seed, some grow and some don't. In speaking this line, I consciously wanted to imply through my tone of voice that everyone would know about the blue cloth.']

There was loud and sustained laughter from the audience as Mary looked down at the cloths she had brought to discover she did not have a blue one.

It will be helpful here to consider the use of cloth in playback theatre performances. It is usual that the playback stage will include a rail or 'tree' of fabric, 'chosen for their colours and textures' (Salas 1993 p.58), although some companies have decided to dispense with them altogether, because they feel that they clutter the stage (p.59). The fabric has an indeterminate quality and a versatility that makes it useful for symbolic use. The range of movement, shape, colours and textures that the fabric affords perhaps explains its ubiquity on the playback stage. Salas writes:

...we've found through experimentation that the less structured the cloth props are, the more expressive and versatile they can be. With

the audience's imagination already engaged, a piece of fabric can be a convincing bride's dress or an animal skin. Usually, the fabric pieces are most useful as mood elements rather than as costumes... More experienced actors use the fabric props very sparsely, usually for mood or to concretise an element in the story. (1993 p.58-9)

Returning to my vignette above: the sequence gives us an insight into the development of the systems of codification in one particular playback theatre performance. It is clear that the fabric is working as more than 'mood elements'; they are beginning to accrue a range of signifying properties. The actor is playing with a distinction in her own mind between 'black and white' and 'glittery' – the former signifying 'surviving'; the latter 'thriving'. She does not, however, inform the spectators of these developing codes. For the spectator a range of possible 'readings' are available. To list a few:

- the fabric used represents clothes being packed in a suitcase
- they are also 'aspects of her' (the teller). So, for example they are
 - characteristics that she wishes to show or not show at the conference
 - the differing colours and textures of the cloth represent qualities of Mary/Viv
 - the 'packing' of the cloths may represent the process of Mary's/Viv's psychological preparation for the conference.

There is, therefore, a certain ambiguity and polysemy in the way that Viv's work with the cloths develops and this is particularly evident when she wraps the elastic around her hands and makes as if to fight with them. The actor is, to some extent, playing with the audience. In addition the blurring of identities between 'Viv' and 'Mary' produces paradoxes and ambiguities of hermeneutic play. Viv's identification with 'Mary' allows slippage across identities. The

audience was, as she says '*close and involved*' with what she was doing and so she revels with them in the play of possible meanings that her actions might signify. In this example the fabric, far from 'cluttering the stage', plays a crucial role in carrying 'meaning'.

The primacy of the signifier

Jacques Lacan's notions of the 'anchoring point' and the 'primacy of the signifier' will shed further light on this process, giving us terms that will be helpful in conceptualising it. Firstly, we should imagine the spectators and the performers watching and listening to 'Mary' and seeking to make sense of the emerging enactment. For each person there is a gradual emergence of meanings as the piece develops. Indeed these emergent meanings apply to the actor also, she probably has no clear idea where the action will take her, and instead she 'discovers' the next action through her interaction with the cloth and the audience response to what she is doing.

Lacan proposes that the emergence of meaning in a spoken sentence is only achieved through the sentence's emergence over time. Lacan writes

...the sentence completes its signification only with its last term, each term being anticipated in the construction of the others, and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect. (1960 p.303)

The 'anchoring point' (or *point de capiton*), which governs this emergence of meaning over time, prevents the signifiers escaping their connection to the signified. It prevents what Lacan calls the 'sliding of signification'. It is this sliding of signification that Lacan believes characterises the unconscious – the signifier 'breaks free from its signified' (Dor 1997 p.44). This release of the signifier from its 'moorings' is, I will argue, of direct relevance to my thesis

since it suggest the process of 'hermeneutic play' which, I believe, characterises the playback enactment.

In order to develop a further understanding of this we must look closely at Lacan's notion of the *primacy of the signifier*. I quote a lengthy section to illustrate his argument.

As a rule, we always give precedence to the signified in our analyses, because it's certainly what is most seductive and what seems at first to be the dimension appropriate to symbolic investigation in psychoanalysis. But in misrecognising the primary mediating role of the signifier, in misrecognising that it is the signifier that in reality is the guiding element, not only do we throw the original understanding of neurotic phenomena, the interpretation of dreams itself, out of balance, but we make ourselves absolutely incapable of understanding what is happening in psychosis. (in Dor 1997 p.44)

In his analysis of Poe's story *The Purloined Letter*, Lacan demonstrates his argument for the primacy of the signified. The characters in Poe's story are 'made to act' in response to a letter, received by the Queen. Each character acts according to their desire to discover the content of the letter, devising secret and complex plans to acquire it. Lacan suggests that the letter may be considered the signifier and its contents, the signified. It is the letter, the signifier, which mobilises the characters – they are acting in response 'to the intolerable nature of the pressure constituted by the letter' (Lacan 1988 p.207). In the same way one may argue that the performers in the above vignette are mobilised by the 'signifier' (the cloth) and follow where it leads. I note, for example, that Sarah's intervention as the workshop facilitator is prompted by her observation of the blue cloth being discarded by 'Mary'. It became a 'seed', a 'dim thought' and 'a fragment to hold on to'. Sarah put this in another way, a way that seemed strange to me at first but now seems to make sense. She said that the blue cloth 'floated into my stomach'. Her

metaphor suggests that she 'ingested' the signifier. The properties and possible significations of the blue cloth were working 'inside' her; she was allowing the signifier to loosen from the signified.

The story of *The Purloined Letter* is, for Lacan, demonstrative of the way that the unconscious works. Through a process of substitutions, the signified disappears from conscious awareness, concealed, as it were, along a labyrinthine chain of signifiers. It may be plausible to argue that the particular demands of playback acting engages unconscious processes - processes that Freud tells us employ the distortions of trope and symbolism and which Lacan proposes follow the logic of the signifier.

A parallel may be drawn here with discourse concerning playback theatre, which, as we have already seen, often stresses *the primacy of the signified* or, put another way, the priority of recovering the original story or meaning. Lacan is of relevance because in stressing the primacy of the signifier, he brings into question this focus on the signified, arguing instead that it is the signifiers that deserve our concentration. As Dor writes in explaining Lacan's point '...it is the chain of signifiers that governs the network of signifieds' (1997 p.50). Of course, the signified never totally disappears except perhaps when the performers are lost in 'tropical jungles'; the audience continue to wonder how the story will be represented.

In my example, we can argue that it is the coloured cloths, as signifiers, that begin to 'govern the network of signifieds'; that they begin to become the 'guiding element' of the enactment. This is illustrated, for example, when Sarah talks about the blue cloth as a 'seed'. In other words the actors (and the spectators, as they follow the development of the piece) begin to follow the

logic demanded by their symbolic encounter with the cloth. This counter-intuitive assertion complicates the straightforward assumption that the actors are primarily concerned with the representation of the teller's story. In fact, acting in playback theatre is characterised by a tension between the act of representation of the teller's narrative and the performers' 'encounter' with each other and with the symbolic.

As the teller's story is 'exposed' to a wider range of codes it is opened up to processes that are somewhat reminiscent of those of the unconscious as described by Freud and Lacan. In the following sections I wish to consider the ways in which time, place and dialogue are performed in playback enactments. This will, I think, develop an appreciation of the ways in which such enactments may promote a certain loosening of the ties between the signifier and the signified. This 'loosening' is suggestive of rather less conscious processes. It promotes reflexive awareness of the process of making meaning out of primary experience and draws the teller's narrative away from its particularity and idiosyncrasy.

a) The representation of time in playback performances.

In everyday conversation we often make a distinction between the chronological and the subjective passage of time. We might say for example that an event 'only lasted five minutes but seemed to go on forever'. Our experience of the passage of time is one way through which we 'measure' the subjective impact of an event upon us. During a recent performance, a teller described a car journey he made after hearing that his young daughter had disappeared while playing at a friend's house. The journey he told us

‘stretched out forever’. In common with other forms of theatre, playback performances compress and stretch out the passage of time to represent our subjective experience of it and to point to the affective loading attached to the events on stage.

Compression and dilation of time.

The French dramatist d’Aubignac wrote in 1657 that a ‘Dramatic Poem’ has two sorts of time – ‘the true time of the Representation’, that is the time of the performance itself, and the time of the ‘Action represented’ (in Brownstein and Daubert 1981 p.72). This simple division will be helpful in analysing how playback enactments deal with time. In terms of d’Aubignac’s first division, playback enactments are often shorter than the telling and usually no longer than 7 or 8 minutes — a period of time largely dictated by the wish to hear a range of different individual’s stories. It is almost always the case that playback enactments involve a considerable compression or, to use the psychoanalytic term, a condensation of time. The events represented are usually of much greater duration than playback’s enactment. Occasionally the opposite is the case and playback performers will stretch or dilate time. A teller may recount, for example, a moment of realisation, or epiphany or terror, which in chronological time was very brief but which the performers may draw out to explore its subjective/experiential texture.

This compression and dilation of time, although certainly not unique to playback theatre, has important implications that bear directly upon my thesis. It may be argued that it directs the spectator’s attention to the *subjective* experience of time – how the passage of time is represented in memory and

in dreams. Our memory of the passage of time is notoriously unreliable. In memory, as in the dream, time does not elapse evenly but jumps forward or dwells at length on a particular episode. Memory compresses, elides or dilates time according to the interests and preoccupations of the rememberer. Through the compression or dilation of time, playback theatre enactments seek to match, or resonate sympathetically with, the processes of memory and the dream. The playback enactment may, therefore, be said to enter the field of personal and collective meaning making.

Sequencing.

Not only does playback 'play' with the duration(s) of time and but it also does so with its *sequencing*. In playback's discourse, a 'literal' enactment would be said to be one in which the performers follow closely the chronological sequence of the events in the teller's narrative. It is interesting that for Playback Theatre York, one of the most difficult types of story to enact is those that follow a clear chronology. The Company often gives these stories the generic name 'travel' or 'action' stories, stressing the linear nature of the story's narration. An example of this kind of story follows. It was told during a performance to General Medical Practitioners in May 2001. The audience had been attending a conference entitled *The Arts and GP Practice*. The audience members — between thirty and forty in number — were largely unknown to each other before the conference; however they had worked together throughout the day using drama to explore professional experience and this may have influenced the level of personal disclosure.

On the Edge:

The 'performer'

The teller begins by reminding us that earlier in the performance, when the audience had been invited to give titles to stories they had told a partner, he had called out the title, 'On the Edge'. He recounts how, a few years ago, he had flown into Newfoundland. The plane needed to circle the airfield a number of times because of thick fog before landing. As the weather 'closed in', he boarded a boat with a group of fellow travellers intending to visit the ice floes. The weather worsened steadily, it became increasingly cold and ice began to close in on the boat. He tells us how they became progressively more frightened as it became clear that the leader of the expedition could not find a way out of the closing ice. With thick fog and the imminent threat of nightfall, they finally found a way through the ice, returning, with huge relief to the 'haven' of a small harbour.

The performers confine the action to the boat, which is indicated to the audience by a piece of elastic stretched into a triangular shape with the teller's actor placed downstage, at the apex of the

The 'reflecting actor'

The problem for the performers in this kind of narrative is how to preserve the sense of progression in the story (from the anticipation of adventure to danger to the safety of the harbour without a linear representation of the events. As I have already noted, playback enactments do not have the burden of 'telling the story ', since that has already been accomplished by the teller. They must add something or elaborate upon some aspect of the story.

<i>triangle – suggesting the prow of the boat. As the danger increases the apex is stretched forward toward the audience. There is an increasing threat that the actors holding onto the other sides of the triangle will not be able to hold on. The loosening of the elastic and the return of the protagonist to the other actors, upstage, convey the arrival at the harbour.</i>	The audience may also have experienced the ‘threat’. At this point it is possible that they may be struck by the loosening elastic.
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This vignette illustrates the way in which playback performers seek to avoid the linear presentation of events. They leave out, for example, the arrival of the aeroplane; they do not point clearly to the departure of the boat or to the arrival in the harbour.

What is interesting is this playback enactment, like most others, tends toward loosening the narrative from what one might call its particularity. This loosening of the story from its particular circumstances may be possible in playback theatre for two reasons. Firstly, the story has already been told and so the performers are, to some extent, released from the task of representing the events in order to tell the story. Secondly, playback narratives emerge within the context of the performance as a whole. For example, the ‘On the Edge’ story followed a short narrative from another member of the audience about the impact of listening to a reading of *The Perfect Storm* that afternoon. In addition, these doctors were attending a course on ‘The Arts in GP Practice’ and some had spoken about how the proceedings had challenged

them and made them think about their practice. It is possible that they may have felt, in some way, 'on the edge' and so this story may have been resonating for them beyond its particularities? The 'threat' of the loosening elastic as it was stretched out towards them may have contributed to a sense of being 'on the edge'. This loosening of the 'literal' signification of a particular story seems to be a property of playback's dramaturgy. Compressing or dilating time as well as altering the sequencing of events may partly achieve such a loosening.

Simultaneity.

One further characteristic of playback theatre's treatment of time is that of simultaneity. It is a relatively common feature of the genre that it will present two time frames simultaneously. For example, a childhood episode recounted by the teller may be presented alongside an adult commentary upon it. The 'adult actor' may watch herself, for example, as a child playing with her brother and comment in some way upon the action. This device involves a considerable complexity of gaze for the viewer. Since the teller is always visible to the audience in this simultaneity of time frames, the spectator may view the teller re-viewing herself re-viewing her memory. This complexity of simultaneously available time-frames draws the spectator's attention to act(s) of memory and the representation of experience. It promotes a high degree of reflexivity. The spectators have available to them a range of 'points of view', each of which allows insight into the act of representing the past. The spectator is offered a series of 'meta-' positions but in doing so is paradoxically reminded that there is no panoptic position from which all may be omnisciently viewed.

Playback's tendency to compress or dilate the duration of time, alter sequencing and present simultaneous time-frames, renders an unequivocal reading of meaning in the performance problematic. The spectator becomes aware of the choices made by the actors and of the processes of interpretation that inevitably are involved in the responses to a personal narrative. It supports an argument that playback theatre is concerned with exploring and playing with hermeneusis (the processes through which we make sense of personal experience).

b) The representation of place in playback theatre.

The improvised nature of playback as well as the relatively bare stage makes it impossible for playback performers to achieve a verisimilitude of setting. The ice floe off Newfoundland cannot be represented naturalistically. Of course the task for the spectator is considerably eased because they have already heard the story and know that the events take place in Newfoundland. Nevertheless it is clear that the performers eschew naturalistic means of indicating location. What is of interest here is the way in which the particularities of the environment are drawn into symbolic relationship with the story. Before I examine in detail this characteristic of playback theatre, a brief comparison with psychodrama may be useful.

There are significant differences between playback theatre and psychodrama in the way that the stage is set. In psychodrama the director will usually ask for a clear and detailed description of the environment in which the protagonist's story took place. Care will usually be taken to clarify this for

the protagonist, the other actors and the audience. Take, for example, this vignette given as an example of psychodrama practice by Eva Roine:

Protagonist: I stood by the window watching my father walk along the road toward the house. I knew he was angry and that I would have to account for what I had done.

Director: Does your father come into the room where you are?

Protagonist: Yes, and when he does, I turn around and want to run away.

Director: What does the room look like? Describe it in detail. Where is the door, the window? Is there anyone else there? (1997 p.127)

This careful geographical orientation is, by and large, absent in playback theatre. The actors themselves make the decisions about how the stage space will be used. This leads, in my experience with Playback Theatre York and in my observations of other playback companies, to a more figurative use of space and relationships within that space. To take Roine's example, in playback theatre the room into which the father walks may be denoted by a single piece of cloth on the floor or by a cloth draped over the teller's actor. The actors may choose to locate the action in a metaphorical space: a womb, an animal's burrow or a child's playhouse. These decisions would be arrived at, without discussion, in light of the whole story given by the protagonist. If, for example, the teller describes her relationship with her father as one of oppressive power, then this will influence the staging decisions made by the actors.

It seems, therefore, that in playback theatre the actors have a considerable degree of artistic freedom given to them by the form. They are more likely to create a *mise-en-scène* illustrative of either their own interpretation of the psychological and social dynamics of the event or, if provided by the protagonist, of her internal representation of it. This 'symbolisation' of place is also evident in 'On the Edge'. The physical environment in which the action takes place accumulates symbolic properties as the pieces progress.

To continue my analysis of place I will introduce another example. This is transcribed from a video recording made at a rehearsal of Playback Theatre York in 1999. Unfortunately, due to reasons of confidentiality, and the wishes of the teller, the video cannot be placed in the public domain and the names have been changed. 'Mike' a married man in his forties told the story, describing a chance meeting with an 'old flame', 'Laura' in a supermarket. He describes himself as 'being in a rut' and of feeling exhausted by the responsibilities of caring for his young baby. Meeting Laura reminds him of his more carefree life before marriage to his wife 'Rachel'. For ease of reference I have entitled this story 'Mike's Story'.

Analysis of the representation of place in the enactment of 'Mike's Story'.

The enactment began with one of the two musicians singing a short song. This accomplished the task of establishing place clearly and economically. She sang to the tune of *Some Enchanted Evening*:

'Some enchanted daytime, when I'm buying groceries'.

The scene continues as 'Mike' and 'Rachel' (his wife) take centre stage: they are both holding cloth. To the audience it is clear that 'Rachel' is holding a baby, her gestures suggest mother with child. At this stage we are unclear as to the significance of a long white cloth held by 'Mike'. There is some sense of it being a burden, but we must wait to see how the scene develops.

'Mike' and 'Rachel' walk along the diagonal lines drawn on the floor. (These were from a previous rehearsal exercise and are not usually a part of the playback stage). Perhaps these characters are walking along the aisles of the supermarket or perhaps these are more symbolic movements suggesting life's tracks or 'being in a rut'. Perhaps the audience is being encouraged to 'read' or view both and possibly more, simultaneously. The fusion of the symbolic and the 'real' is introduced, which is exploited as the piece develops. This heightens the sense of indeterminacy and polysemy. This fusion is significantly enhanced when the following dialogue takes place as the actors pace along the diagonals:

Laura: 'Now what do I need?'

Rachel: 'Now what do I want?'

Laura: 'Now what do I need?'

Uncast actor: 'Now what do I need?'

Other actors pick up this refrain.

The audience are being invited to contemplate the supermarket as a metaphor here. The practicalities of supermarket shopping – its qualities of prosaic everyday routine and the task of searching for what is 'needed' – are being substituted for Mike's sense of his life 'slipping through his fingers' and

of the duties and responsibilities of family life that are challenged by his meeting with the 'old flame'. Additionally 'Mike' is now examining the white cloth that we may initially perceive as the burden of the shopping. It is 'slipping through his fingers' as he contemplates the past. The cloth is gathering associations both for the actor as he develops a relationship with it and for the spectators.

Perhaps it is important that it is the wife, with the phrase: 'Don't forget the nappies', who reminds us (and 'Mike') that this scene is taking place in a supermarket. It is also important, I think, that the 'baby' does not change, it remains a stable signifier throughout the action. Perhaps it reminds us of the 'unchanging realities' that Mike perceives face him at home. The 'wife' plays her part as the carrier of 'the reality principle'.

It is notable that towards the middle of the piece the location becomes indeterminate, during which time the protagonist speaks to himself about his situation. The audience are invited to see this section as one of interior monologue: for example, when Mike says 'If only you could be a little more like this', it is not made clear if he is saying this to his wife. There is some uncertainty as to this and to the location of the action at the point of the enactment.

The final scene is in Mike's home. It seems appropriate that his wife sets the location through the simple device of 'switching on the TV' and saying 'I love this programme'. Throughout the entire enactment it seems to be the task of Rachel to fix the scene in recognisable locations. The act of switching on the T.V. is relatively unambiguous and recognisable to the spectator. It locates the scene in Mike's home. Mike may wish that his wife was more like

her, but by the simple act of switching on the T.V. Mike and the audience are reminded of the 'reality' of his 'responsibilities'.

Meanings are being delivered not only through the dialogue and staging but also through the ways in which realistic and symbolic material are being introduced. The 'wife' seems to be fixing unambiguous significations - the baby, the nappies, the home, the T.V. - while the dialogue and the properties used by 'Mike' have multiple meanings and a more symbolic, polysemic quality - the white cloth, the line 'What do I want?' for example. The performers may be said to have set up a contrast between the 'wishes' of the teller, explored, to a degree, more figuratively, and the 'realities' of his family situation, which are represented in a less figurative style particularly through the agency of the wife. In that sense my earlier point about the ideological loading of the 'literal' seems pertinent.

The singing of the song *There's a place for us* by an uncast actor serves to introduce a note of irony into this homely scene - or we may read it as such. The spectator is left wondering about the motivations of the singer and may consider at least two 'takes' on this scene: that it is a poignant evocation of home or that it may be considered an ironic commentary on the tensions that are so apparent? What is certainly the case is that the song introduces uncertainty; it allows multiple interpretations of the scene.

The piece ends rather bleakly: as 'Rachel' reaches out to 'Mike' he moves away saying 'I'll just get the shopping' and picks up the white cloth. Both the statement and the action suggest to me a kind of resignation; it is interesting that the white cloth seems to have lost some of its resonance. If the enactment may be said to be partly an exploration of possibility

represented at one point through the running of the white cloth through the fingers, then at the end it seems as if the cloth loses some of those possibilities.

The ways in which the location of the teller's action is drawn into a symbolic exploration of the story is a relatively common aspect of playback's dramaturgy. This is apparent in the *On the Edge* (page 147). NB All the action takes place on what the spectators may suppose is the boat. However this boat, created by elastic stretched into a triangular shape, is introduced in such a way that it suggests a tension between the excitement and adventure of personal risk and the opposite impulse toward personal safety. It may be that the actors were led to this exploration by the stories that preceded 'On the Edge'. One member of the audience had, for example, spoken about the risk of performing in front of his fellow GPs at a workshop that immediately preceded the performance. Additionally, it may be that the 'risk' to the audience, introduced by the stretching elastic may have not only represented the particular story, but also dramatised the sense of risk in the audience.

The abundance of means of signification available to playback performers draws attention to the process of representation of personal story, resonates with the ways in which conscious and unconscious processes manage experience, and promotes transitive communication by loosening the narrative from its particularity. As I stated at the opening of this chapter, while the 'telling' is primarily conducted through *verbal* means, the performers in the 'enactment' have a far wider range of systems of symbolisation available to them. It will be interesting to consider this further through an analysis of the

verbal in playback enactments. It may be instructive to consider, for example, what happens to the teller's words as they reappear in the enactment.

c) *Dialogue in playback theatre.*

To a significant extent, drama in Playback Theatre is not conveyed with words. In fact, the entire thrust of the performance is to take the verbal rendition of experience and translate it into not-so-verbal drama...the dramatic part of the performance is permeated with non-linguistic elements - so much so that Playback has often been described as a kind of mime. The process of this particular kind of story dramatisation has a hypnotic effect on the audience; they are taken away from their normal rational-intellectual responses. (Fox 1994 p.39)

It is not a question of eliminating spoken language but of giving words something of the importance they have in dreams. (Artaud 1998 p.191)

There seems to be a tendency, within playback discourse, to favour non-verbal communication over verbal, and, in so doing, to suppose a link between the verbal and the 'rational-intellectual'. A criticism that members of Playback Theatre York often make of their work is that 'it was too verbal' or that 'we talked too much'. We sometimes talk about a 'flight into words' and note that this is often a sign that we are not 'warmed up'. This injunction to avoid words is more complex than it first appears. Playback does not, in its practice, eschew words, rather it uses them in ways which contrast with the usual narrative 'rendition of experience' that was evident in the 'telling' of the story. In practice playback does indeed give words 'something of the importance they have in dreams'. The following example will illustrate my point and will recall Lacan's notion of the primacy of the signifier, particularly since the slippage of the signifier from the signified is especially evident in dreams.

Repetition and the Primacy of the Signifier

This vignette is drawn from a performance that took place in Newcastle upon Tyne in April 2001 to an audience of professionals working in health and social care. The story concerned a woman who was gradually deteriorating from the effects of Alzheimer's disease. The teller, who had been a very close friend of this woman, described how distressed she was at seeing her friend's deterioration. Only two actors were cast – the teller's actor and her friend with Alzheimer's disease. The rest of the actors formed a chorus and commented upon the action. The chorus began to play with the word 'lost':

'I've lost my

'I have...

'I've lost...

'I'm lost..'

'lost'

'I'm lost...'

'I have lost my memory'

'I have lost my...'

'I have lost my friend'

There are two important points to note here. Firstly, that the chorus build up the phrases, repeating them in different ways for emphasis. This type of repetition is common in playback theatre enactments. Secondly, the chorus is playing upon the word 'lost', exploring its different possible meanings to progress the enactment. The word 'lost' has at least three meanings in this extract - being lost, losing memory and losing a friend. The signifier 'lost'

begins to slip and slide as the actors play with it and, for me, there is a poignancy in allowing the word 'lost' to encompass both the loss of memory and the loss of a friend. The slippage of the signifier permits a dream-like process of 'condensation' in which, as Freud wrote, 'collective and composite figures and ... strange composite structures' (1995 p. 61) are created. This process of condensation is, as Lacan points out, analogous to the metaphoric process of signifying substitution (Dor 1997). In an analogous fashion to metaphor, in condensation:

...the latent elements that present shared characteristics fuse together, so that they are all represented on the manifest level by a single element. This is how the composite characters, collective figures, and neological composites that inhabit our dreams are made. (Dor 1997 p.59)

The kind of hermeneutic play with dialogue evidenced by the chorus in this sequence is, in my experience, fairly common in the work of Playback Theatre York.

Emerging dialogue

There is another aspect to the dialogue of playback theatre that gives it 'something of the importance it has in dreams' and that is the fact of its *improvised emergence*. Lacan tells us that 'the anchoring point' in dialogue operates so that the signifier is prevented from sliding away, as it were, from the signified. For Lacan, in dreams and in psychotic experience, the anchoring point is loosened or absent, so the signifiers gain primacy. I would suggest that because playback dialogue is improvised within ensemble, there is a certain loosening of the anchor between the signifier and the signified because its direction is not under 'monologic' control – it is emerging through

polyphonic encounter. Consider the following example taken from 'Mike's Story'. 'Mike' and 'Laura' have just met; 'Mike' is running the white cloth through his hands and a kind of parallel conversation takes place between them.

Mike: So much stuff

Laura: Show me (stepping downstage and directly addressing the audience). I wonder what it would have been like?

Mike: O God, Yes.

Laura: Is it a bit stupid then? Its a long time ago.

Mike: One could have...

Laura: Life takes its turns and...

Mike: ...and goes on this and that path.

Laura: If I'd turned another way.

Mike: But just supposing, just supposing, just supposing. You really turned me on you know.

Laura: I know.

In this sequence the 'usual forward-moving, speaker-listener/listener-speaker, turn taking system' (Aston and Savona 1991 p.64) of conversation is subverted. Through a combination of dramatic asides ('I wonder what it would have been like'), repetition and short incomplete sentences, the actors convey a sense of longing and regret. Their lines seem to drift off into wistful yearning. Their reflections are interrupted when, after 'Mike' says, 'You really turn me on you know', an uncast actor leads the wife, 'Rachel', across the diagonal.

The actors are improvising this sequence together; they are picking up on each other's cues:

Laura: Life takes its turns and...

Mike: ...and goes on this and that path.

They are also making their own 'offers', initiating ideas to develop the 'conversation'. The above has not been pre-planned or rehearsed, and this has, at least, two important implications for an understanding of dialogue in playback theatre. Firstly, one might ask the question: if these lines do not come from a text, how are they created? Or to ask a question often posed by audience members after a performance: how did you know what to say? This is a complex question. The performers, one would suppose, draw from personal experience, from an understanding of the teller's story and from a cultural storehouse of similar kinds of stories. They 'accept offers' (Johnstone 1981) given by other actors and respond to cues given them by fellow performers. They do so with sufficient openness and spontaneous engagement to allow the enactment to 'emerge' rather than to be determined by a pre-existing plan.

Secondly, dialogue in playback theatre is generated as the performers respond to the 'here and now' exigencies of the stage environment. Instead of ignoring the 'extra-textual' problems that performers often face on stage it is relatively common for playback performers to make use of them. A simple example, taken from the 'On the Edge' (page 147) enactment will illustrate my point:

<p><i>The ‘performer’</i></p> <p><i>The actors create the boat through forming a triangle with a long piece of elastic. The teller’s actor forms the apex of the triangle, stretching away from the ‘base’ created by the other sides and elongating the triangle in the direction of the audience. As the elastic stretches, the actors forming the triangle’s base find it difficult to hold on. I shout ‘Hold on!’ Another replies, ‘I can’t hold on’.</i></p> <p><i>As the tension in the elastic increases it begins to slip out of the actors’ fingers.</i></p>	<p><i>The ‘reflecting actor’</i></p> <p>The stimulus from this piece of dialogue and from what then developed came from the exigencies of the stage environment. This resonated closely with an aspect of the teller’s story: it was a story about nearly ‘letting go’ of the safety of the boat and of going almost too far away from home ‘base’.</p> <p>The dialogue that develops around the stretching elastic, and the problems the actors face in holding on to the elastic, help to represent the story. In other words the performative and the referential work together.</p>
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Two observations are pertinent. Firstly, to some extent, dialogue in a playback theatre enactment is ‘discovered’. The actors and musicians work out the dialogue through the tensions that develop between the performative

and the referential. Secondly, as there has been no opportunity for the actors to explore what impact the text may have on the audience or on other performers, as there would be for actors working from a dramatic text, the actors are discovering the impact of their words only as they speak them. They discover this from the reaction of the other actors, the audience and from the impact the words have on the developing action.

From these two qualities of improvised dialogue, it is clear that, to some extent, dialogue is discovered or 'encountered' in relationship. It requires the actors to maintain a high level of awareness in the here and now and to be able to respond spontaneously to the changing circumstances of the performance.

Dialogue may be 'discovered in relationship' as I have suggested above, but it may also be a kind of avoidance, a distraction or a refusal to enter into the teller's story. Words are ubiquitous; they may easily lose their currency. A descent into cliché and stereotype is a constant possibility in improvised dialogue, since the paradox remains that in improvising speech. It is difficult to avoid stock phrases and formulaic routines – in responding spontaneously it is difficult to be fresh. Cliché might be seen as language that has lost its vibrancy and texture through repetition. I would argue that dialogue in successful playback maintains that vibrancy and texture through a willingness of the performers to play with the signifiers and to allow verbal sequences to emerge through relationship and encounter. The spectator is presented with a contrast between the relatively limited styles of telling open to the teller and the excess of styles and rhetorical devices available to the

performers. This is likely to destabilise the story, in a similar way as perhaps dreams do to our daytime experiences.

A very different kind of dialogue? Between the stories.

Returning to Fox's letter to the Moreno Institute there is a second and related aspect of this 'very different kind of dialogue' and that is to do with the status of the individual story and its relationship to successive stories. He writes

While playback stories are sometimes corrected or transformed, there is much less of a tendency [than in psychodrama] to call for a surplus reality re-enactment [one that seeks for redress] because the playback conductor knows that the next story, even from another teller, is likely to provide a completion of the one before. (1999)

I am particularly interested in Fox's claim here that there will be relationships between the stories and that thus a kind of loose, associative dialogue develops as the performance progresses. The August 2000 issue of *Interplay* refers to this characteristic of playback in relation to the Theatre of the Oppressed. The authors stress the non-cognitive nature of the playback process and argue that the Theatre of the Oppressed tends to be more focused on '...cognitive insights and on practical action. It is pedagogical, aim-orientated' while on the other hand playback theatre '...brings up the "untold" without necessarily processing it.... It does not focus on an intellectual understanding or on action of the audience other than telling'.

In respect of psychodrama and the Theatre of the Oppressed it seems that this difference is an important one in constructing playback's identity. It seems important to identify what claims may lie behind playback's claim to 'otherness'. In playback discourse it is often claimed that there are complex
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relationships between stories emerging within a performance. Folma Hoesch (1999) argues that there is what she calls a 'red thread' running through the stories in a playback performance. She writes:

During playback performances or among groups who do playback we find again and again that the stories respond to each other and furthermore, that they offer patterns for solution and transformation. (1999 p.47)

This notion of some connection between the stories in playback theatre is not confined to the playback literature - 'One story heals another' is a phrase that seems to be commonly used within playback theatre discourse. Indeed, I have heard this expressed by British, American and Australian playback practitioners. What underlies it is a notion that stories, which are painful or in some way traumatic, or which implicitly ask a difficult question, will later be responded to in the performance. Heinrich Dauber puts it like this:

...playback theatre 'works' because the story telling is not limited to a personal meaning, but rather creates a collective meaning of a contingent reality. 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. (1999 p.165)

Fox develops this idea of a set of connecting themes running through a performance and forming an unconscious dialogue amongst the participants by claiming that 'This "red thread" can be understood as containing a kind of folk wisdom' (1999 p.118). He does not go on to specifically elaborate on this claim; however, it seems to be somewhat reminiscent of his discussion on the oral tradition, to the extent that both involve a 'communal telling' (1999 p.120). In this 'communal telling' knowledge or insight is passed through stories in which, '...the value, or meaning, often reveals itself only indirectly' (1999 p.119).

Hoesch seeks to discover how stories are connected in playback performances and in doing so she aims to 'understand the relation between the individual and the group' (1999 p.47). She argues that because playback theatre stories are not commented on at length following their enactment, and no attempt is made to 'understand' them or analyse them this puts the audience in

...a different state of consciousness very quickly. A slight trance is created. We begin to 'think' in stories and pictures, we watch and add stories to other stories, fit pictures to pictures without our rational primary process getting started.' (1999 p.54)

She argues that this 'altered state of consciousness' opens up a dreamlike state in which images and tropes relate to each other in loose associations. 'Stories answer each other and communicate like parts of a dream' (1999 p.63). This, she tells us, is why playback theatre is so helpful in the process of building communities and working with conflict. She does not tell us why this should be the case. A guess might be that it builds 'unconscious' communications within the audience that may be able to address, without direct focus, conflict within groups.

The contrast to Boal is now drawn for playback practitioners wishing to establish playback's 'otherness'. However, the claim that Boal's theatre begins from the broader political perspective is unsustainable, as Boal writes:

The Theatre of the Oppressed is the theatre of the first person plural. It is absolutely vital to begin with an individual account, but if it does not pluralise of its own accord we must go beyond it by means of analogical induction, so that it may be studied by all the participants. (1995 p.45)

Rather like playback theatre, the Theatre of the Oppressed begins with the individual account, but, unlike playback, Boal insists on a process through

which that account is *explicitly* and cognitively pluralised, so that, as he writes, '...the oppression of one is the oppression of all' (1995 p.45). This difference and the implications that flow from it are worth examination. In constituting their difference in relation to both psychodrama and the Theatre of the Oppressed, playback writers seem to stress the non-cognitive (right brain) nature of communication in playback. They seem to resist generalised cognitive formulations; indeed, such approaches to playback have met considerable resistance. For example, an attempt by Francis Batten to analyse the social forces behind an individual story within an enactment were met with considerable disapproval at The International Playback Conference in Australia, in 1999 (an incident that is considered at length in *Chapter Seven*).

Boal does recognise that in the case of 'Cop in the Head or Rainbow of Desire sessions' stories will be told which are '...singularised in the extreme, removed from the particular circumstances of the other participants' (1995 p.45). However, in such a case Boal argues that the participants will be '...held in the grip of empathy' (p.45) unable to identify and analyse the shared social and political dynamics within the story and limited to the role of spectator. His strategy in this case is to encourage the telling of analogous stories, images or scenes. Through this multiplication of analogous perspectives, the participants will be able to perform a 'distanced analysis' so that '...the general mechanisms by means of which the oppression is produced' (p.45) are revealed.

But perhaps I misrepresent Boal at this point. I confess to a little confusion at what he writes next: 'We do not interpret, we explain nothing, we

only offer multiple points of reference' (p.45). Is he saying, as he seems to be, that no interpretation is placed upon the accumulation of these analogous stories? However, does not the call for analogous accounts impose a kind of interpretative frame upon what will be offered? Participants are being guided toward stories which are, in some way, homologous to the 'singularised' story. Surely if they are to cast light on 'the general mechanisms by means of which oppression is produced' a cognitive, analytical process must take place. A distanced analysis must surely involve some form of interpretation and explanation.

As I have argued in *Chapter Three* there is no such thing as the singularised account. As soon as one person speaks to one other about their experience, the story is in one sense doubled. In the case of a theatre performance in which personal stories are told there is, through the narration, an invisible and highly complex process of multiplication of the particular story that cannot be controlled. This last point is an important one: Boal's insistence on 'distanced analysis' or that the story be 'studied' by the participants suggests an attempt to control the meanings that could be attributed to it. Is 'control' imposed in the Theatre of the Oppressed by the requirement for cognitive 'readings' that limit the myriad resonances of the story within and amongst the spectators?

How does one characterise this claim for playback theatre that, supposedly, in contrast to both psychodrama and the Theatre of the Oppressed, it creates a trance-like accumulation and association of stories? Maybe it is that playback practitioners wish to avoid the interpretative control they perceive in the psychotherapeutic tradition and in the supposed

cognitivism of Boal's theatre. One can argue that there is a kind of romanticism running through much of playback's discourse which, Quinton tells us, '...prefers feeling to thoughts, more specifically, emotion to calculation, imagination to literal common sense, intuition to intellect (1995 p.778). This 'romanticism' is a worrying element in playback discourse; it suggests a dimming of conscious awareness and personal agency which seems contradictory to the radical democratic and communitarian traditions to which the movement lays claim. Here I have in mind Buber, Illich and Friere: figures who are mentioned as being important to Fox (Dauber 1999 p.70).

Despite this however, I want to suggest that the emphasis on the figurative and the non-cognitive in playback discourse, together with claims for a kind of transpersonal dialogue across the stories told, may also partly derive out of the very different position of the teller vis-à-vis the performers in playback's dramaturgy. The non-involvement of the teller in the dramatisation may have the effect of de-emphasising the 'literal' in the story. Unlike psychodrama and the Theatre of the Oppressed, the teller is not in the action to 'pin' it to the precisely 'factual'. The performers may have a greater degree of latitude, therefore, in playing with the meanings of the story.

The non-involvement of the teller in the enactment is perhaps the least analysed aspect of the genre. It is a crucial and constitutive element of playback that is strikingly absent in its literature, one that is implied but not often directly dealt with. It is an absence that may reveal a great deal. In the next section I will advance the proposal that the reflexive dynamics released by the 'passivity' of the teller and the consequent 'freedom' of the actors may contribute to that '...different state of consciousness' to which Hoesch refers.

It is my proposal that the decision of playback to 'confine' the teller to the role of spectator may be a crucial one in permitting hermeneutic play and so understanding the dynamics of the form.

Part Two:

The position of the teller in playback theatre.

In his letter of 1999 to the Moreno Institute Fox identifies another difference between playback theatre and psychodrama in the following way:

The playback actors have creative and therapeutic authority. The balance of power between protagonist/teller, auxiliary ego/actor, and director/conductor is different in the two methods. In playback theatre the conductor 'turns over' the story to the actors, and the teller is encouraged not to interrupt until it's over. This difference places an emphasis in playback on the actors' understanding and creativity. (1999)

The way this 'significant difference' is conceptualised is revealing. In emphasising the 'authority' of the actors, Fox fails to mention its correlative – the non-involvement of the teller in the dramatic action. This omission is a little strange since it is on this point that the difference between playback theatre and other cognate disciplines such as psychodrama, the Theatre of the Oppressed and dramatherapy, is most marked.

Challenging playback theatre: Moreno, Boal and dramatherapy.

In his analysis of the history of catharsis, Moreno identifies two kinds of catharsis, one primary and active, the other secondary and passive. He proposes an 'avenue' which led, on the one hand, 'from Greek drama to the conventional drama of today' (1987 p.49) in which 'the process of mental catharsis was conceived as being localised in the spectator – a passive catharsis' (p.49). On the other hand, he proposes another avenue, which emerged from the religions of the East and the Near East in which 'the process of realisation took place in the subject – the living person who was

seeking the catharsis' (p.49). Moreno goes on to argue that psychodrama has performed a synthesis of these two avenues, yet he is very clear that passive catharsis is 'secondary' (p.50) to what he calls 'active catharsis'. In a remarkable statement which expresses somewhat differently his belief in the active involvement of the protagonist, Moreno argues for the 'central, axiomatic and universal' (p.12) importance of *embodiment* in psychodrama.

It is no longer the master, the great priest, or the therapist who embodies God. The image of God can take form and embodiment through every man – the epileptic, the schizophrenic, the prostitute, the poor and rejected. They can all at any time step upon the stage ... and give their version of the meaning the universe has for them. God is always within and among us, as he is for children. Instead of coming down from the skies, he comes in by way of the stage door. (p.12)

This is a clear statement of the liberation that Moreno believes derives from the active protagonist, empowered by his or her embodiment upon the stage. Moreno did see the value of 'passive catharsis'; he proposed, and psychodrama practice maintains, a number of exercises in which the protagonist remains a spectator. For example, Roine (1997 p.138) describes the role of the 'deputy' who stands in for, and is directed by, the protagonist. She sees this as a means through which a protagonist who may be 'embarrassed about showing emotions' may have their 'story' enacted.

Moreno also describes a similar procedure, which he terms the 'mirror technique'. The purpose is however rather different.

Sometimes a patient overacts when he is too eager to act as himself. In order that the patient may see himself from the proper perspective, an auxiliary ego acts in the role of the patient. The patient is then trained to see himself more objectively, much as in a mirror, and he learns, from watching the auxiliary ego, how to act in better relation to the realities. (p. 74)

In both these examples it is clear that the casting of another actor to play the protagonist is regarded as a transitional arrangement which will eventually

result in their assuming their own role on the psychodramatic stage. Moreno was very clear about the importance of the protagonist taking the stage. He saw his task as liberating the protagonist from what he saw as the sterility and passivity of the psychiatrist's couch. He writes:

In the course of psychodramatic procedures we put the protagonist back on his feet. He is back in the fullness of his natural habitat of space and time. The couch and chair protagonist is now free from couch and chair. (1959 p.135)

Moreno emphasised the importance of action in the psychodramatic method and developed the term 'action-insight' which he saw as 'the integration of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and inter-personal learning experiences' (Kellerman 1992 p.86) and which emphasised the centrality of the kind of insight that derives from engagement and action.

Boal's analysis of the importance of the active involvement of the spectator (or spect-actor) comes from a different source than Moreno's. Boal's inspiration is Marxist in the sense that one might say that he argues for the protagonist 'seizing the means of representation'; and Brechtian, in his rejection of Aristotelian catharsis (1979). For Boal the 'mainstream theatre juxtaposes two worlds, the world of the audience and that of the stage' (1995 p.41). What happens on stage is 'autonomous' in the sense that the audience do not have the opportunity to change what is happening. 'The conventional theatre ritual' he argues 'is conservative, *immobiliste*, opposed to progress' (p.41) . Although he does not deny that such theatre can transmit ideas, which are 'mobilising'; nevertheless, for him 'the ritual remains immobilising' (p.42). Boal argues that the Theatre of the Oppressed activates theatre, creating a 'totally transitive' relationship between the stage and the audience. In this transitive relationship (later to be termed 'transitive democracy' in Legislative Personal stories in public places: an investigation of playback theatre. Nick Rowe. March 2005

Theatre in Boal 1998) the spectator becomes the artist creating a 'world of images of his own reality' (1995 p.44).

For Boal the oppressed must 'create their own world of images of their own oppressions' (p.42). Instead of being 'penetrated by the emotions of others', the 'oppressed becomes the artist' (p.43). Moreno's assertions come from the liberation of the individual through spontaneity, embodiment and the re-enactment of the traumatic, whereas Boal's emerge out of a political analysis of power in the theatre. Nevertheless both, from their own positions, pose a serious challenge to the relative passivity of the teller in playback theatre practice. Denying the protagonist the opportunity to perform seems, from the standpoint of Boal and Moreno, to be disempowering and, perhaps, even elitist since it emphasises the interpretive authority of the actor.

It is also axiomatic within the practice of dramatherapy that the 'client' should be actively and dramatically engaged in his or her 'treatment'. Of the 'nine core processes' within dramatherapy identified by Phil Jones (1996) five clearly involve dramatic action on the part of the participant – the therapeutic performance process; personification and impersonation; embodiment and playing. Jones writes, for example of the 'therapeutic performance process': 'By engaging in the physicalisation or representation, a shift in the client's relationship to the material may occur' (1996 p.102). And again in reference to embodiment:

...the acted out embodiment of an issue involves a bodily experiencing of the material in the present. It means that through embodiment the client presents and encounters their issues in the here and now. (p.113)

A response to the challenge

In Fox's *Acts of Service* there is one reference to the position of the teller in playback theatre:

...Brecht was concerned to foster the 'adulthood' of audience, and Augusto Boal, influenced by Paolo Friere as well as Brecht, wrote about the 'active' involvement of the audience as a way of combating the actor-provider, spectator-receiver idea. In this concept, dramatic communication is a 'dialogue' between equally adult parties. *This way of thinking ignores the essentially regressive aspect of the audience experience*, but it does, at least, show respect for the capacity of theatregoers to respond in a mature, autonomous manner. (1994 p.111) (The emphasis is mine).

This is a striking passage that leaves much unsaid and unexplained. As a footnote, Fox refers us to David Cole's (1975) book, *The Theatrical Event*, which, he tells us '...emphasises the appropriateness of the 'passiveness' of the audience'.

As Susan Bennett (1997) has argued, the notion of the passive audience member is hard to sustain. Audiences are actively engaged in the de-coding of meaning and in complex processes of identification and transference.

Spectators are ... trained to be passive in their demonstrated behaviour during a theatrical performance, but to be active in their decoding of the sign systems made available. Performers rely on the active decoding, but passive behaviour of the audience so that they can unfold the planned on-stage activity. (p.206)

I would propose that Fox's notion of 'regression' is not a useful one. Together with the romanticism identified earlier it suggests a lack of agency on the part of the spectator. I would prefer to argue that the non-involvement of the teller is not just a key difference it is also a crucial constituent aspect of playback's dramaturgy – an aspect which builds complex levels of reflexive awareness

into the performance. In full view of the audience, the teller recounts her story, casts the actors, as directed by the conductor, and, when the conductor says, 'Let's watch', turns to observe the ensuing enactment. She has become a spectator and, most importantly to my argument, *a spectated-upon spectator*. It is, I think, immediately clear that the spectating of the teller is very different from that of the audience member. He is, firstly, in view of the audience and, secondly, he is watching his own story being enacted – a fact that will profoundly effect the spectators' reception. Crucially, the fact that the audience are aware that they are watching the teller watching his own story will add a certain reflexive complexity to their viewing. Walter Benjamin writes that in Brecht's theatre:

A double object is provided for the audience's interest. First, the events shown on stage; these must be of such a kind that they may, at certain decisive points, be checked by the audience against its own experience. Second, the production; this must be transparent as to its artistic armature... His effort to make the audience interested in the theatre as experts ... is an expression of his political purpose. (in Bennett 1997 p. 21-2)

The audience have, at least, two 'objects' in view: the teller-as-spectator and the performers' enactment. Moreover, the fact that the story has already been told in a playback performance may mean that the audience are more likely to pay greater attention to means of representation employed by the performers. The complex gaze of epic theatre is compounded on the playback stage, as may be demonstrated through the following schema:

A schema of complex seeing

- The teller views her story and herself being played upon the stage by another.

- The spectator views the teller viewing her story and herself being played upon the stage by another.
- The teller is aware that she is being viewed viewing her story and herself being played upon the stage by another.
- The presence of the conductor onstage, seated next to the teller, is a reminder of the mediated, constructed nature of what is being dramatised.
- The performers are aware of the gaze of both the teller and the audience.

The 'reflecting actor'

In my experience, performers avoid the gaze of the teller during the enactment. This is especially the case for the teller's actor. It feels too much – too invasive. Maybe the tension between identification and distance that lends a sense of 'psychic safety' would collapse.

There is a lot of viewing going on. This 'picture' may be further complicated by a brief consideration of what processes are operating for the spectator and how their reception of the event is influenced by the presence of the teller. Barbara Freedman writes of 'a spectator consciousness' that is '... an epistemological model based upon an observer who stands outside of what she sees in a definite position of mastery over it' (1991 p.9).

This 'standing outside' of what is viewed may, especially in film, promote what Laura Mulvey calls an 'illusion of looking in on a private world' (1975 p.9). She is writing of a sense that the spectator can view without any

relation or involvement with the viewed. Such is the 'imperialist and the male gaze' analysed by Ann Kaplan:

...it's an objectifying gaze, one that refuses mutual gazing, mutual subject-to-subject recognition. It refuses what I am calling a 'looking relation'. (1997 p.79)

But Mulvey is right when she argues that such a objectified gaze is an illusion. For Lacan and Kristeva it seems that the viewer is *captured by the gaze*. In Lacan's analysis of Holbien's *The Ambassadors* (1998) and Kristeva's of *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1989) the viewer enters into the canvas and is captured by it. As in Lacan's mirror-stage the picture is a lure to captivate the viewer (Payne 1996). Kristeva writes:

Our gaze follows the slightest physical detail; it is, as it were nailed, crucified and is riveted to the hand placed at the centre of the composition. (1989 p.14)

For both Lacan and Kristeva the spectator is not a free observer but is captured by the picture. This has much in common with the Freudian notion of projection in which we see in others, often unconsciously, ourselves 'writ large'. We cannot view without entering into a relationship with the viewed and that relationship inflects what we view.

This rejection of the separated passive spectator enables me to add further complexity to my 'schema of complex seeing':

- The spectator is 'captured' by the image on stage and, to follow Kristeva, it is as if he was watching/hearing himself upon the stage.

- The spectator may also view/hear the image of the teller-as-spectator and, through the process that Lacan and Kristeva describe, gazes upon himself watching himself upon the stage.
- An excess of spectatorship is produced through the complex interplay of the referential and the performative that particularly characterises improvised performances and through the proliferation of different systems of representation.

Such complex viewing will surely bring a particular reflexive dynamic to the playback *mise-scène*. David MacBeth writes:

By most accounts, reflexivity is a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and world, and for penetrating the representation exercise itself. (2001 p.35)

The presence of the teller-conductor dyad onstage exemplifies the doubleness of referential/performativity, on the one hand, and of distance/identification, on the other, that is characteristic of theatre. In doing so it produces complex angles of reflexivity for the spectator. Through being a kind of 'exemplar of spectatorhood' the presence of the teller-as-spectator is likely to draw our attention to the 'representation exercise' and so remind the spectator of the contingency of what is taking place. The complex gaze is likely to undermine the possibility of one, authoritative position from which to view, interpret or understand our personal experience. It may be that in this way playback expresses its 'political purpose': to reveal the processes through which humans make meaning out of their experience and so reveal these processes to be mutable and contingent: the 'cops in the head' (Boal

1995), those internalised figures of oppression, are divested of their totalising authority.

The 'apologist'

In playback rehearsals I sometimes tell my own stories to release myself from their hold over me. Feeling trapped by my own narratives, the different perspectives brought by others loosens me from the narrative's grip.

Ben Okri writes: 'Stories can drive you mad' (1996 p.25).

And 'Stories can be either bacteria or light: they can infect a system, or illuminate a world'. (p.33)

Chapter Five

Acting in Playback Theatre: Making Sport of our Humanness.

...the actor is doing something forbidden, he is playing with his humanness and making sport of it' (Copeau 1990 p.73).

At a Playback Theatre York rehearsal in August 2003 members of the Company were introduced to an exercise and potential short form to be used in performance. It was later entitled *Four Levels*. The exercise was designed by a Finnish company to encourage actors to be aware of, and find ways of representing, the wider context of the personal story:

Four actors stand in a line across the stage. After the story is told, one after the other and individually, they play different aspects of the teller's story.

In 'the first position' an actor plays the 'personal story' of the teller. The actor finishes in a still tableau; this is the cue for the second actor.

In 'the second position' the actor plays the 'social, cultural and political' aspects of the story.

In 'the third position' the actor bases their enactment on what they think might be 'the reasons for the teller telling this story at this particular moment'.

In 'the fourth position' the last performer attempts to translate the story into a 'mythic' dimension (by, for example, employing a fairy tale or an archetypal character or story).

During the rehearsal the exercise operated not only by contextualising the individual story as it was designed to do, but also by destabilising it as an integral entity. This raised ethical questions for the company since, inevitably, dimensions of the story were explored and hypothesised that were not directly referred to by the teller. For example, an actor, playing the contextual 'third position' in a story about the ambivalence of a man moving up into a senior management role at work, stressed the teller's masculinity within *this* playback company of mainly women. She did this through verbally stating 'I am a man' and placed the teller's trumpet in such a way as to mimic a penis. Another actor in 'the second position' became a rather sinister Svengali-like character, introducing the actor in the 'first position' to 'Level 5 of the corridors of power', encouraging him to look at the 'insects' that 'crawled below in levels 1 to 4', and to think of the levels that lay above him. He worried that the new recruit to management would not be able to 'get the insect out of his head'. For the tellers the exercise seemed an exciting but challenging and disorientating one; a small change was subsequently adopted: a 'fifth position' which was a return to the personal first position.

The first position was very familiar to the actors; the others caused more difficulty and discussion. The ease with which the actors felt they could enact the 'first position' is perhaps instructive. It is not because actors do not make use of other subject positions in their work: they do. It is rather that performers are more familiar with adopting a position that calls upon the empathy of the performer and maintains the imagined integrity of the autonomous ego. However, this exercise calls for more than the representation of autonomous egos: in a Brechtian move it calls for a

'...changeover from representation to commentary' (Brecht 1964 p.48). By opening up a space between character and actor, the exercise introduced perspective(s) and commentary on the story. For example, by taking a particular position in relation to the story the two actors introduced a certain parodic commentary upon it so undermining the heroic masculine interpretation that could be adopted. Through the use of different perspectives the exercise fomented the multiplication of possible interpretations. In terms of my thesis, it encouraged hermeneutic play. As such it was a vivid example of how effective playback may operate.

Usually playback performers are not confined to a particular position as they are in this exercise; they have the freedom to choose, even when cast by the teller. In this chapter I will explore the assertion that through giving the performers the freedom to take up different subject positions in relation to the teller's story, playback theatre produces a largely non-hierarchical (no one interpretation is authoritative), polyphonic and 'unfinalisable' response to autobiographical narrative. Playback enactments emerge, I will suggest, out of the interrelationship and dialogue amongst a complex range of subject positions and perspectives that are made possible by the improvised nature of the performance and the structures of the form. Moreover, just as the exercise does, this process suggests a different conception of the self than is often implied in playback discourse; it suggests a self that is multiple, contingent and relational rather than one that is stable and autonomous.

Polyphony

It is Bakhtin's concept of polyphony or 'multi-voicedness' (1994 p.92) and his associated ideas of *dialogism* and *the position of the author*, that provide a useful springboard for the discussion of polyphony. Bakhtin's view of the polyphonous novel is one in which the author (for Bakhtin, Dostoevsky is the exemplar) enables, or sets the stage for dialogue, between different voices. For Bakhtin, the author does not disappear in the polyphonous novel, instead he or she, 'creates a world in which many disparate points of view may enter.' (Morson and Emerson 1990 p.239). Bakhtin proposes that

It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that in principle cannot be fitted within the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its very nature *full of event potential* and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses. (1984 p.81)

Bakhtin's favouring of polyphony develops out of his hostility to what he calls 'theoretism': the tendency in the humanities to create systems and structures and mimic the epistemology of the physical sciences (Morson and Emerson 1990 p.101). Instead he searches for a 'dialogic sense of truth' that does not transcribe away the 'eventness of the event' and does not exclude the particular, the unfinalisable and the unforeseen. Morson and Emerson explain:

The dialogic sense of truth manifests unfinalisability by existing on the 'threshold' (porog) of several interacting consciousnesses, a 'plurality' of 'unmerged' voices. Crucial here is the modifier unmerged. These voices cannot be contained within a single consciousness, as in monologism; rather their separateness is essential to the dialogue. Even when they agree, as they may, they do so from different perspectives and different senses of the world. (1990 p.236-7)

Of course Bakhtin was describing the novel, not the theatre. In fact he argues that drama is 'a monolithic genre' in which the focus on the character,

the authority of the director, and the drive toward the final resolution of differences in classic tragedy, reduce the possibilities of polyphony (Carlson 1992 p.314). Despite this Carlson proposes that because of the 'multiple voices of enactment', Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and polyphony '...should provide a rich area for the study of the creation of meaning and of psychic relationships' (p.322).

It is the potential for capturing the complexity of reflexive voices in playback enactments and the stress Bakhtin places on the threshold event that makes his ideas so fruitful for conceptualising playback. A man's story about his ambivalence toward moving up into senior management is 'prised open' by the different 'takes' offered by the actors. A note of irony is introduced; the different perspectives both undermine the possibility of maintaining one authoritative version of his story *and* draw attention to the process of creating autobiographical narratives. This becomes possible because the multiple subject positions are not merged into one organising voice but maintain separate voices capable of responding reflexively to each other and to the teller's story.

In this and the following chapter I want to analyse the dimensions and extent of this 'interaction of consciousnesses' within playback enactments. In this chapter I will focus largely on the individual performer and some of the different subject positions open to him. In the next chapter the focus will shift to the work of the ensemble. I will suggest that this intra-psychic and inter-psychic multi-voicedness in playback theatre allows the possibility of hermeneutic play. To employ Bakhtin's analogy I will seek to conceive of the playback enactment as 'Copernican' rather than 'Ptolemaic' (Morson and

Emerson 1990 p.240). The enactment does not 'orbit' around the teller's narrative or the 'authenticity' of the actor, like the stars and planets do the earth in the Ptolemaic vision. Rather, as in the Copernican vision, many consciousnesses interact with each other in complex orbits and in doing so potentiate a play on meaning. Of course 'acting the other' raises significant ethical issues and these will be alluded to as the chapter progresses.

Authenticity or 'being oneself'.

Perhaps the most demanding role of all is one that traditional actors are not usually called upon to master – being oneself. (Salas 1993 p.47)

Playback acting requires a particular kind of acting which we can call *authentic* acting, as opposed to the more stylised acting familiar from television, film and most other kinds of theatre, however naturalistic. In playback acting, the actor does not use a code to depict emotion but draws her portrayal directly from her sense of the teller and the story. (Salas 1999 p.25)

...training to be an actor does not only demand learning skills, an apprenticeship in doing, it demands equally an apprenticeship to *being*. (Fox 1994 p.110)

Authenticity in the spontaneous moment underlies Playback theatre practice. (IPTN 1999)

These claims, made by playback's leading exponents, suggest that its acting relies not only on the 'sense of the teller and the story', but also on the 'authentic self' characterised by a lack of artifice or simulation ('the actor does not use a code') and a commitment to 'being'. Although it is clear from much of their other work that both Fox and Salas recognise other sources for the playback actor, it is their claim for authenticity that is, I think, problematic. This is particularly the case since, from the Salas quotes, authenticity and 'being oneself' seem to be characteristics that are active in constituting playback's

difference from other theatre practices. The problem with these conceptions is that, without considerable nuancing, they

...designate the actor's self as the *logos* of performance ...and assume that the actor's self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of the self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths. (Auslander 1995 p.60)

In theatre the notion of 'authenticity' is closely related to that of the 'presence' of the actor. It presupposes in some way that the actor has a stable, authoritative reference point beyond mediation. There has been a significant tradition running through twentieth-century drama theory that stresses the merit of the presence of the actor. Stanislavski, Artaud, Grotowski and Julian Beck in different ways, call for the 'pure' presence of the performer, which will enable transformative and authentic theatre (Auslander 1995).

What is implicitly assumed in the claim for authentic playback acting is the idea of a stable structure beyond the sign, or to use Derrida's turn of phrase, '...beyond the reach of play' (1978 p.279). Derrida tells us that 'something' has happened to the concept of structure, something that he calls an 'event' or, later, a 'rupture'. He suggests that throughout most of Western history and philosophy, the complexity of structures have always been '...neutralised or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a centre or of referring to a point of presence, a fixed origin' (Derrida 1978 p.278).

This fixing of a 'point of presence' seems to have had two important functions, firstly, to '...limit what we might call the play of the structure' (p.278), and secondly, to reduce anxiety:

...for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught up in the game, of being as it were at stake in the game at the outset. (p.279)

The desire for a 'point of presence' lies behind the claims for authenticity; moreover, as Adorno (2003) has argued, the desire is also a regular trope in a claim for authority; it closes off debate and analysis. The use of such 'sacred ceremonial words' as authenticity prevent critical thought, as Adorno writes: '...whoever is versed in the jargon does not have to say what he thinks, does not even have to think properly' (2003 p.9). His argument is compelling, particularly in light of his contention that this jargon of authenticity provides a 'refuge' for fascism in which '...a smouldering evil expresses itself as though it were salvation' (p.5). Of course, I am not arguing that the use of the term in playback provides such a refuge, nevertheless it is over-simplistic and a kind of fantasy to conceive of the 'authentic' actor who 'does not use a code'. We cannot escape the play of signification; even the unconscious, as Derrida tells us, is subject to the vagaries of mediation (Auslander 1995 p.61). History intrudes on '...every word and withholds each word from the recovery of some alleged original meaning' (Adorno, 1986: 5). Or as Clifford Geertz puts it, humans 'do not float as bounded psychic entities, detached from their backgrounds...their identity is one they borrow from their setting' (1984 p.132).

The notion of authenticity apparent in playback discourse does not sufficiently convey the play of meaning and signification in performances, nor does it allow for the polyphony, which, I propose, is one of playback's key characteristics. The notion of a stable self that precedes, and provides an authoritative source for, the performance, is problematic to such a degree that

it is best replaced by a notion of selves being dynamically created in and through performance. As I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, if we are to use the term authenticity in playback acting – and because of its inherent difficulties that word may best be avoided – then it would be best understood as the capacity of the actor to remain responsive and open to the range of perspectives, voices or ‘channels’ available to him.

Other voices.

There are always other voices available and I am aware of other perspectives as I write. A reflexive shift of register may help to demonstrate my argument, emphasising that ‘writing playback’, like performing it, cannot be accomplished through one epistemology. In an earlier draft of this chapter, I made these assertions about playback acting from the positions of the ‘apologist’ and the ‘writer’.

The ‘apologist’

- *The playback actor looks for an ‘honest’ or ‘authentic’ response to the teller’s story.*
- *In order to do this, the actor makes use of his or her own personal experience/feeling.*
- *As a playback actor I would subscribe to Jacques Copeau’s statement of a paradox: ‘For the actor, the whole art is the gift of himself. In order to give himself, he must first possess himself’ (1990 p.70).*
- *Or, as taken from the lexicon, the actor needs to ‘play from the heart’.*

- *The actor must be open to and respond to his awareness of the 'immediate psychophysical process of engaging in performing' (Zarrilli 1995 p.13)*
- *Similarly, the actor must be open to, and respond to, his relationships with the other performers (actors and musicians).*
- *The actor should be free of what Copeau calls cabotinage: 'It is the malady of insincerity, or rather falseness. He who suffers from it ceases to be authentic or human...Outer reality no longer reaches him. He is no longer aware of his own feelings' (1990 p.253).*
- *The actor needs to rely on what Marguiles (1989) calls 'the empathic imagination' or Rowe and Maclsaac's (1989) term 'empathic attunement'.*

As this chapter progresses I will examine these 'insider' views looking particularly at the claims that the actor needs to be 'authentic', make a 'gift of himself' and employ an 'empathic imagination'. What can these ideas mean in light of the arguments I have already rehearsed? Must they now be abandoned? I am aware of an anxiety that the exposure of my ideas to critical analysis will somehow break the precious blue vase to which I referred in *Chapter Two* (page 37). Again, in an earlier draft of this chapter I wrote the following.

The 'writer'

This concept of authenticity is one for which I have a great deal of sympathy. I am aware of many times in which I have felt that I have

revealed something of myself in portraying the teller's story. Or at least, I have made use, for example, of my own experiences of depression, neurotic anxiety, loss or the joys of parenthood. I am also aware, however, that claims for the actor's authenticity rely upon particular notions of the self and of 'actorly presence', which will need some critique. To this extent I find myself in an uncomfortable position, since interrogating these ideas of authenticity and self revelation expose me to the risk of 'losing my footing' as a playback performer. I confess to a fear (and perhaps a feeling of betrayal) that such an examination may lead me to destroy the beliefs that sustain me as an actor and make playback theatre such an important part of my personal and professional life. This fear may be indicative of the strong ideological component within playback theatre - that for many it is more than a useful technique, it is a strongly held set of beliefs.

Auslander tells us that Hal Foster noted the prevalent belief amongst dancers that dance is '...the most appropriate medium of expression for primal emotional and libidinal dimensions of human experience' (1992 p.74) and that this has led to a 'sanctimonious mutism' in which the process of the dancer becomes unspeakable and ineffable. Perhaps the dream of the blue vase, reflecting, as it does, a suspicion of research generally in the playback theatre community, is a variant of this 'sanctimonious mutism'.

Multiple Subject Positions.

The following enactment took place in July 2001. It was at a Playback Theatre York performance commissioned by The North East Change Council,

an organisation that supports and promotes change in health and social service agencies. The performance took place in a conference room in a Newcastle hotel. The audience comprised of about 60 people from social, health and voluntary organisations. The conductor had opened the performance by talking about personal and organisational change and encouraged the audience to reflect upon their own experiences of change. The teller of this particular story recounted an episode of depression in his life and his subsequent recovery. He entitled it *Deliverance*; I have adopted his title. Together with other examples of playback practice, extracts from this enactment appear throughout the chapter. A full transcript will be found in *Appendix Four*. The account was written the day after the performance. The first sequence exemplifies processes of identification and transference employed by the actor.

<i>The ‘performer’</i>	<i>The ‘reflecting actor’</i>
<p>1. <i>The teller describes a period in his life in which he was ‘desperate’ and in a state of ‘terror’. He chooses me to play him. I stand up.</i></p>	<p>1. As the only male actor in the acting team I suspected that I might be chosen. As soon as I stood up I was reminded of a previous performance in which I had played a man who had been through a significant period of mental ill health. (This is detailed as <i>Experiences from the Deep End</i> in <i>Appendix Five</i>) I had felt that had been successful and so I was keen to</p>

	play the part.
<p>2. <i>He says that during his period of 'depression' his mother had died. It was a time in which he was overwhelmed and distressed by persecutory thoughts. He spent days in his room, afraid to come out. He describes how, after his mother's death, he moved back to the North East and gradually began to improve with the help of family and friends. The conductor asks him for a title, he suggests 'Deliverance'. He gives an image of himself on top of a mountain with friends looking down and celebrating his deliverance.</i></p> <p>3. <i>The conductor says 'Let's watch'. I wait by the side of the stage. The musician plays. I listen hoping to find something in their music that will help me. I notice my breathing is becoming heavier and there are</i></p>	<p>2. I felt a strong identification with the teller – I recognised the obsession with persecutory thoughts, the wish to hide and I thought I knew what he meant by the word 'deliverance'. I was reminded of a period in my life when I had had similar experiences.</p> <p>3. Although I did not know how the enactment would develop, I knew that these physical experiences would provide me with movement and sound to begin the piece. One way of putting this is that what I would do</p>

<i>'churning' feelings in my stomach. I concentrate on these feelings.</i>	would come from the breathing and the stomach.
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Identification and Transference.

'The performer'

We turned to the teller. Our eyes met. I felt from the teller a sense of recognition. A brief intimate moment of contact – a blurring of identity.

(from: Experiences from the Deep End. See Appendix Five)

Through the psychoanalytically related terms identification and transference, Freud recognises that the relationship between the analyst and the analysand opens up a process of negotiation of identity and meaning. As Brooks puts it, these processes facilitate entry into a '...semiotic and interpretive space' (1994 p.52), characterised by a fluid, transitive and complex interchange of perception and interpretation. Or, as Klauber tells us, transference is '...the area in which truth and illusion mingle inextricably' (1987 p.1). These processes are not confined to therapy: as Wilshire points out, they are also active within theatre.

The basic facts energising theatrical art are (1) that persons identify with others, even to the point of assuming permanently their modes of being and behaviour....and (2) that persons can bring this and related facts to thematic awareness through engaging in short-term acts of identification and enactment. (1982 p.23)

The process of identification is particularly pertinent to playback theatre performances since the teller's actor is identifying with, and inviting identification from, a teller who is present at the performance. During my first Personal stories in public places: an investigation of playback theatre. Nick Rowe. March 2005

playback performance as an actor, having completed an enactment in which I had been cast as the teller's actor, I turned to look at him and experienced a feeling of 'deep connection'. We held each other's gaze for some time and I remember gaining the impression, as the teller searched my eyes, that, in some way, he was looking there for himself. Another playback actor, Viv, recalled a similar process following a performance to the British Psychodrama Association. She described her feelings toward a teller, who had chosen her to be the teller's actor: 'She chose me and I knew she would choose me. When she spoke about me, it was as if she knew me and what I've been through.'

For another actor, Louise, the process of identification began at the beginning of the performance event and continued until the actor was chosen to be the protagonist.

In the pre-performance 'mingling', I was drawn to a group of young people sitting in the front row and talked to them about what had brought them to the performance. One of the young women, in particular, drew my attention. I had the experience of looking in the mirror and the face that looked back at me was one I know well. During the performance I found my eyes inadvertently meeting hers and a warm glance passed between us. This young woman came forward to tell the last story of the performance. I knew that she would probably choose me to be her and I was delighted when she did. (Larkinson 2000)

The 'novelist'

Rona looked at the line of four actors sitting on chairs in front of a rack of coloured cloth. Who would she choose to play her? As her eyes moved along the group she was drawn to Bridget. It was something about the way she was sitting in the chair, slightly slumped as if

pressed down by some force, a tension in her face and, unlike some of the others, not looking at Rona. It was likely, Rona thought, that Bridget did not want to be chosen, but there was something about her vulnerability, her reluctance, that drew Rona to say, 'Bridget'.
Bridget stood up.

The moment of casting is a potent one: it signals a process of identification between teller and actor. The teller chooses the actor because, in some way, he identifies with him, perhaps because of gender, physical similarities, characteristics that the teller has observed previously or because the performer has said something with which the teller finds a personal connection.

On the last point - at the beginning of a performance the actors tell a brief moment from their personal lives and other members of the acting troupe enact these. It is fairly common that the teller will refer to these moments when telling their story and they may choose the teller's actor because of that. For example, I have been chosen because I had spoken about my mother's illness, and on another occasion, because I had complained about being overwhelmed by work. So the process of identification on the part of the teller often begins well before he or she decides to tell. Indeed, it may be the case that the decision to *tell* is partly influenced by earlier identifications.

Particular identification through the activation of the performer's personal memory seems fairly common in playback enactments. In *Deliverance* as I stood listening to the story, I was aware of memories of a

relatively mild depressive phase in my late twenties and the physical feelings that accompanied that. As another example the reader may recall the description Viv gave of an experience of 'a colourless time' in her life, which provided a strong impetus in her dramatic choices (see page 137). NB

Hélène Cixous warns, however, of the delights and dangers of identification (Diamond 1999 p.390). Diamond explains:

Cixous is describing the mimetic pleasures of identification – becoming or inhabiting the other on the stage or in spectatorial fantasy; I stand in for her, act in his place. Such acts are distinctly imperialistic and narcissistic: I lose nothing – there is no loss of self – rather I appropriate you, amplifying my 'I' into an authoritative 'we'. (1999 p.390)

The dangers are evident in this report of a playback teller given by Aviva Apel-Rosenthal:

Choosing an actor [in playback] has the effect of a voodoo doll. One teller said: 'You know when you prick a voodoo doll, it hurts, it can kill. I cried and I laughed with my actor. I died and came alive. I could feel on my skin every stroke, on my lips every kiss.' (2002)

Cixous's concern is that the consequences of identification are the denial of difference and distance. I force myself into the teller, engulfing the subtleties of his experience, erasing his identity and replacing it with my own. I possess him. My empathy precludes his otherness. Because the processes of identification are so intense in playback this danger is always present. The presence of the teller and the need for the actor to improvise may potentially collapse the psychic distance between performer and character and between teller and actor. Far from offering a viewpoint on the idiosyncrasy of the other, empathy may occlude it. Differences of gender, ethnicity and sexuality may be erased in this process of identification.

This danger of psychic fusion emphasises the importance of the performers accessing different subject positions. But Diamond is not so pessimistic about the possibilities of identification; she wonders if it 'might be understood as a psychic activity that destabilises the subject' (1999 p391) and proposes a 'politics of identification',

...a politics that dismantles the phenomenological universals of transcendent subjects and objects, that places identity in an unstable and contingent relation to identification, and that works close to the nerves that divide/connect the psychic and the social. (p.397)

To compound the complexity of my 'schema of complex seeing' set out at the end of *Chapter Four*, as the teller watches the actor standing in for him a space is opened up. At least two possible identities are available: his own and the performer who is standing in for him. In acts of transference the actor transfers his own identifications onto the teller's 'character'. The teller can see this; 'copies' are being made. As Brooks writes, the transferential is a place of fictions, of reproduction, of reprints, of repetitions' (1994 p.68). Identity is destabilised because imperfect 'copies' are made and the 'original' is relativised. The fantasy of the transcendent subject is challenged by the response of another. Far from 'violence to the other', acts of identification and transference may open up room for fresh perspectives to be accessed. Brooks again: 'It is only through assuming the burden and the risks of the transferential situation that one reaches the understanding of otherness' (p.70). If teller and actor risk the intense and complex processes of identification that ricochet between them, this will produce reflexive contemplations on identity(ies). To adapt Brooks: in entering the dynamics of transference and identification the performers and the teller (if they choose) renounce 'the totalitarian foreclosure of interpretation and meaning' (p.71).

Wilshire suggests another process that compounds the complexity of reception:

Through the actor's deliberate identifications with and standings in we discover our largely undeliberate identifications with and standings in. [...]. The actor models modelling, enacts enactments. (1982 p.16)

Particularly since the teller is visible to the audience, the effects of identification draw attention, as it were, to themselves. They remind us of, and perhaps reveal, 'our largely undeliberate identifications'. Spectators (including the teller, might well wonder how the performers will re- (or de-) construct the *Deliverance* narrative and become aware of their own identifications with a story of being 'delivered from depression'. This awareness of identification may well, as Diamond argues, reveal the contingency of identity and work 'close to the nerves that divide/connect the psychic and the social'.

Revealing the self?

Of affective memory, Stanislavski wrote:

We cannot directly act on our emotions, but we can prod our creative fantasy in a necessary direction and fantasy ...stirs up our *affective memory*, calling up from its secret depths, beyond the reach of consciousness, elements of already experienced emotions, and re-groups them to correspond with the images that arise in us. (1981 p.187)

Although as a playback performer, I draw upon my personal memory it does not follow that I am, to paraphrase Salas, 'being myself' (1993 p.47). Personal memory is only one of many channels that are open to the improvising performer. To maintain that the actor must be 'themselves' is to assume an authentic, essential self beyond Derrida's 'game'.

The privileging of the self-revelation and authenticity of the actor is certainly not new. Moreno requires that the protagonist/actor is

...asked to be himself on the stage, to portray his own private world. He is not an actor compelled to sacrifice his own private self to the role imposed upon him by the playwright. (1987 p.140)

In a similar vein, Stanislavski writes that the actor should not submit himself solely to the wishes of the director or the playwright but, in order to enter his role, '...he must use his own living desires, engendered and worked over by himself, and he must exercise his own will and not that of another' (1995 p.254).

There has been a thread running through dramatic theory and practice, certainly since Stanislavski, which Richard Drain (1995), in his anthology of twentieth-century theatre theory, terms the 'Inner Dimension'. The demand for the revelation of the actor's self on stage can be seen in the work of Artaud, Grotowski, Copeau, Brook and Julian Beck for example. In different ways these practitioners and theorists have sought to establish theatre practice which is wholly or largely based on the self-exploration of the performers. They have often contrasted their work, as do Salas and Fox, with what they perceive to be a traditional or conventional theatre practice characterised by artifice, the subjection of the actor to the playwright or director, and the disappearance of the actor's self behind the role. Jerzy Grotowski, one of the most rigorous exponents of 'self revelation' in acting writes:

When I say that the action must engage the whole personality of the actor [...] it is a question of the very essence of the actor's calling, of a reaction on his part allowing him to reveal one after the other the different layers of his personality, from the biological-instinctive source via the channel of consciousness and thought, to that summit which is so difficult to define and in which all becomes unity. (1995 p.279-280)

Grotowski seems to be saying that there is, at the 'summit', a unified foundational self – a 'soul', perhaps, that becomes a 'gift' and 'a provocation' to the spectator. As Judith Butler might say, it is an 'epistemological paradigm that presumes the priority of the doer to the deed' (1990 p.148). In light of my wish to create a more pluralist and relational ontology to conceptualise playback such a conception is difficult to maintain. Instead, we need to look elsewhere. Kenneth Gergen (1991) proposes that the post-modern condition is one of 'multiphrenia', characterised by 'the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self investments' (1991 p.74). Linda Hutcheon argues, the self must now be seen as being in a 'flux of contextualised identities' (1989 p.46).

Instead of grounding the performance in the self as Grotowski suggests, Auslander argues that '...the self is not an autonomous foundation for acting, but is produced by the performance it supposedly grounds' (1995 p.60). In other words, selves are made and improvised within performance – rather like the protoselves created through autobiographical remembering (See *Chapter 3* and Barclay, 1994). Butler writes of the paradigmatic 'presentist' conceit that there is an 'I' that arrives in the world of discourse without a history.

...there is no 'I' that stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse. On the contrary, the only 'I' comes into being through being called, named, interpellated, to use the Althusserian term, and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the 'I'; it is the transitive invocation of the 'I'. (1993 p.70)

In light of the deconstruction of the 'presentist' self, we might instead regard the actor as a kind of '*intertext*' situated in a network of influences or impulses, which cannot be seen as separate from the context in which they arise.

However, the choice of the trope 'intertext' limits the performative nature of

the process. In an interesting counterpoint to Salas's call, the Japanese playback practitioner, Makoto Tange's conception of a 'tube' may help:

The actor is simply a tube on stage. His Ego, intention, personality can all vanish - a totally 'selfless' being. The lines of the play just pass through his/her body. (2002 p.12)

The use of 'tube' was a translation from the Japanese and a 'conduit' may be preferable. However, the notion of effacing the self is a problematic one, as Benjamin noted in relation to storytelling: '...traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way that handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel' (1970 p.92). Nevertheless, the sense of the transitive that is suggested by a 'tube' renders it preferable to 'being oneself' as a trope for the playback actor. A return to the 'tropical jungle' may identify other possible tropes for the playback performer. However it is likely that the complexity of playback performing will make the search for a suitable metaphor a futile one.

Possible tropes for the playback performer.

A sponge: but a sponge that alters the water that is absorbed by it – too passive.

The performer breathes in and then exhales the story: in doing so, through complex chemical reactions, she changes it. This seems to lack a sense of agency; it seems too automatic.

A music producer at a mixing desk who blends the sound 'channels' together into a desired effect: useful for conveying the multiple 'channels', but misleading since it suggests a director capable of controlling the precise configuration of the piece. Performers do not have that level of control.

<p><i>An alchemist</i>: gives a sense of 'transformation' but seems too much of a mystical fantasy.</p>

Table 3. An experiment with different tropes for the playback performer

To conclude this section: a subject position was called for, or 'interpellated', during the moments of the telling of *Deliverance*: a younger man – younger than me – who was insecure and vulnerable. He came from both my personal and performing past, but was present in the body. Althusser's concept of 'interpellation' needs careful inflection. Ideology hails or 'interpellates' individuals to function in roles to which they are allocated (Althusser 1971). The concept therefore suggests ideological imposition. There are, however, choices for the performer to make: he is not totally determined by ideology. Nevertheless, as this analysis progresses it will be possible to identify the systems of ideas that 'hail' the performer.

The 'useful' body

Stanislavski writes the following:

An actor on the stage need only sense the smallest modicum of organic physical truth in his action or general state and instantly his emotions will respond to his inner faith in the genuineness of what his body is doing. (1983 p.150)

Most improvising performers must rely heavily on the body. With no written text to guide them they often find impetus through somatic impulses. An awareness of, and relinquishing to, the body seems to be important for the improvising performer (Pisk 1990; Marshall 2001; Zinder 2002). In a rather intimidating passage, for example, Lorna Marshall writes:

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...you must be able to bring your body into free and easy contact with the emotions, other performers, the language of the text, style of presentation and, eventually, the audience. It must be fully alive, in dialogue with your inner life, and able to vividly express a chosen human reality. (2001 p. 9)

Her language, at this point, is full of imperatives, yet she does express what, in my experience of playback theatre, is relatively common: for the actor to make crucial use of the physical experiences that occur both during the telling of the story and in the performance. The process of identification engages at the somatic as well as at a cognitive/emotional level and these physiological experiences are influenced both by the actor's personal memory. Perhaps, my memory of the depressive feelings revived by the teller's narrative is located in the stomach - and by memories of past tellers. In other words the 'arrival' of these bodily sensations does not come, as it were, 'out of the blue'; they are located in an immanent network of associations triggered by the teller's story and the style of its telling.

Sensations that are present in the actor's body are always mediated through its representations. The body cannot simply be conceived of as an originary source; the body is ideological. As Bordo writes 'The body.... is a medium of culture' (Forte 1999 p.249) and as some feminist scholars (Bordo 1998; Forte 1999) have indicated, the presumption of an authoritative, corporeal source for the performer's inspiration denies the cultural representations of the body, which will inflect the direction of any enactment. To maintain the body as an arbiter of truth in theatrical exchange is, as Auslander proposes, to hold '...a metaphysical even mystical concept; it is asocial, undifferentiated, raceless, genderless and therefore neutralised and quietist' (Auslander 1992 p.92).

Despite the problems of considering the body as a primary, unmediated source of action for the performer, somatic material remains key in providing direction to playback enactments. Indeed, I would argue that the 'receptor task', in which '...we must be in the moment, animal-like' (Fox 1994 p.101) is crucial to successful playback. The performer engages in a somatic encounter with the teller's narrative – the body serves as both source and as a key means of representation. Aware of this, the playback theatre conductor and trainer, Robyn Weir, wants to 'ground' the acting in 'a physical and theatrical language' (2003) and imagines enacting a teller's experience of depression:

It is hard for me as an actor to work with just a feeling or even a composite of feelings that are presented to me through a teller and conductor travelling along a primarily adjectival pathway... *but* if the teller ...has used the word 'falling' for example ...I have the great opportunity to **do** something...I get to find the story in the falling. The falling gives me my choreography that is more than just the physical dimension. It is a choreography that is language in time and space, very specific and anchored in a story and so very available to everyone's eyes. The fall carries the feeling. The fall might just carry the whole story, or that central point around which (...) layers of interpretation for the teller exist. It can accommodate many basic theatrical principles like tempo, fixed points and gesture, floor patterns and tone, all of which are moving along the narrative track for the teller. (2003)

Her phrase 'The fall carries the feeling' is a striking one. The metaphor of a 'fall' given by the teller is enacted and gives the actor her 'choreography'.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) are particularly interested in, what they call, these 'body-in-space' metaphors because of their ubiquity in speech. For example:

'I'm **behind** in my work'.

'I don't know **where** this idea will **lead** me'.

'He's very **up front** about his feelings'.

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'I feel like an **outsider**'.

They write of this preference for such metaphors:

Our subjective mental life is enormous in its scope and richness (...)
Yet, as rich as these experiences are, much of the way we
conceptualise them, and visualise them comes from other domains of
experience. These other domains are mostly sensori-motor
domains.(Lakoff and Johnson 1999 p.45)

They argue that the structure of our thinking, reasoning, and
understanding of the world, is *shaped bodily*. Or put differently, the way our
bodies and brains are constructed (and have evolved) has determined how
we think and reason. Thought and reason do not exist outside the materiality
and viscosity of the body. They are not transcendent entities existing
separately from the body, nor is there any possibility of thought which is not
shaped by the details of our embodiment. The body and the way it moves in
space is the basic pattern, Lakoff and Johnson suggest, of thought, and the
categories that we use to organise our cognition and perception derive from
the realities of the human body and its relationships to space.

The following sequence from a performance in Newcastle in February
2000 further illustrates the potential of actors embodying body-in-space
metaphors offered by tellers. The audience comprised of between 50 and 60
users of mental health services and professionals meeting in a mental health
centre familiar to the audience. Some of the dynamics described with regard
to the Halifax performance in *Chapter One* pertain here. I have titled the
sequence, as the teller did, *Experiences from the Deep End*. A full transcript
of this enactment may be found in *Appendix Five*.

The 'Performer'

During a playback performance at a centre for people who use mental health services, a man tells a story about his 'mental breakdown' in Australia. He entitles it 'Reflections from the Deep End'. He starts by telling us that his journey in Australia was one of 'discovery' in which he 'found his feet'. During his travels, he had come to like himself for the first time in his life. However, as his time in Australia elapsed, he says that he began to over-reach himself, believing that he could do and be whatever he wanted. He began to lose his 'footing'. He became what he terms 'manic' and eventually this led to his hospitalisation. Depression was followed by a return to England, his family and gradual recovery. As he improved he says, 'What I have learned is that I need people around me to help me stay grounded'. The teller casts me as the actor to play him and as I stand listening to his story, the central metaphorical cluster of 'finding my feet', 'being grounded', 'losing my footing' and being 'rooted' plays in my mind. It gives me the 'key' to my performance. Not knowing where I would end up, I use the feeling of my feet firmly planted on the ground as the starting point and the impulse for further action. Gradually I begin to lose my 'footing' ...

Useful as Lakoff and Johnson's formulations are in understanding the relationship between language, thought and the body, they do not fully take into account the political inscription upon the body. Susan Bordo gives a broader picture of the 'socially constructed body':

Our materiality (which includes history, race, gender, and so forth, but also the biology and evolutionary history of our bodies, and our

dependence on the natural environment) impinges on us – shapes, constrains and empowers us – both as thinkers and knowers, and also as ‘practical’ fleshy bodies. (1998 p.91)

The embodiment of ‘depression’ in *Deliverance* and ‘mania’ in *Experiences from the Deep End* has ideological consequences. Both may imply that, in some way, the pathology is located in the individual and his psyche and biology and not, for example, in the social structure or in pathological family dynamics. It may be that embodiment, uninflected by other perspectives, may diminish socio-cultural perspectives on the tellers’ experiences. It is not likely to provide alternative – less individualised or more systemic – explanations for what these men called ‘depression’ or ‘mania’.

What’s more, over-emphasis on representation through the body risks stressing a lack of control and choice on the part of the tellers – one might conclude that the forces of ‘unreason’ possessed them. Perhaps the performer seems ‘possessed’ by the story, he careers across the stage; it seems as if he cannot control the forces that move his body. The danger is that the actor, responding to the teller’s narrative, may find particular cultural and historical representations or ‘embodiments’ of ‘madness’ that stress ‘the fear of the irrational’ (Parker, Georgaca et al. 1995). No doubt this would be due to cultural associations between the body and the irrational. The actor’s physical response to the teller’s narrative is not an ‘innocent’ one, or to put it another way, the actor’s body is not a blank slate upon which the teller’s narrative is written. However, recognising the ‘socially constructed body’ does not preclude the importance of the ‘material’ body. Bordo asks:

Let’s agree we cannot ‘get outside’ the (historically sedimented) discourses and representations that shape our reality. Does this mean

that all we are legitimately permitted to talk about is our reality as discourse and representation? (1998 p.89)

We need to understand the relationship between the body in representation and the 'material' body (Forte 1999). This does not mean a return to the natural, unmediated body, but rather signals a different 'register' – that of the 'useful body' (1999 p.249). In response to tellers' stories, performers experience changes in their bodies; they may choose to allow these feelings to move them across space and in moving they discover more of the 'choreography' of the piece. To be sure the feelings and movement are culturally shaped, but potentially, they also make visible the 'complex interaction of body and culture' (p.250).

Memory and culture.

It is one of the central propositions of my thesis that playback theatre does not, and cannot, replicate the original experience of the teller. Indeed, as I argued in *Chapter Three*, even the teller's narrative cannot replicate that experience. Playback theatre is rather *a mediation of a mediation*, or perhaps we might say that it is *a dramatisation of a narrative of the primary experience and of the performers' response to it*. This, I think, has important consequences for our understanding of playback. In complex ways, the enactment comments as much upon the narrator's construction of their experience and on the performers' response to that narration as on the experience itself. Because of this, the spectator's attention is inevitably drawn to cultural processes of representation and narrative construction - to the mediation of human experience. Bringing this process to the fore should,

theoretically, promote a reflexive awareness of the 'constructedness' of human experience.

The actor's work draws heavily on previous performances, on sequences derived from performance and rehearsal and on 'cultural narratives' (Polkinghorne 1988). These 'pressures' upon the actor construct the possible subject positions that are open to the performer. Returning to *Deliverance* to explore this: the teller has completed his story and I am standing at the side of the stage waiting for the other actors to finish preparing.

The ‘performer’

4. When the music stops I take a position centre stage. I scream out; my hands come together to ‘stab’ into my stomach and as they do so I ‘double up’ –I repeat this a few times. As I do so the musician matches the stabs with strong drum beats.

One of the other actor places some black netting on my head.

The ‘reflecting actor’

4. I had used these movements before in other performances and rehearsals.

The thoughts I recall as this was happening were:

- That I may frighten or disturb the audience.
- I remembered a performance where I had screamed out and one or two members of the audience had laughed, so momentarily I worried that my screams would produce that reaction again.
- As I continued the stabbing movements I remembered a statue in a small Normandy church of the Virgin Mary with seven knives in her torso. The statue was entitled *Notre Dames des Sept Doleurs*.
- I also began to worry that this could go on too long and I had no idea where to go next. I hoped that one of the other actors would help.

Here the actor is drawing upon memory in complex ways: the actor's memories of the teller's story interact with his memory of previous performances, with a recollection of a Catholic sado-masochistic image of guilt and pain, together with the actor's personal memory of a 'depressive phase'. The stabbing actions emerge with this particular constellation. Although not unique to playback theatre this complexity and polyphony of memory is crucial because it suggests different subject positions to the performer and opens up the possibilities of hermeneutic play. It is my proposal that a playback enactment is successful to the extent to which the individual performer and the ensemble remain prepared to activate these different memories.

Baz Kershaw stresses 'the centrality of memory' to the performance process (1999 p.173). Kershaw argues that Schechner's notion of 'restored behaviour' as being the main characteristic of performance (Schechner 1985) pays insufficient attention to the 'interiority' of performance and the 'centrality of memory'. He writes that 'without memory there cannot be any restored behaviour' and that 'restored behaviour is memory made manifest' (p.173). He proposes that this memory is 'doubled' and distinguishes between memory *in* performance and memory *of* performance. For the former he cites such examples as the memory of rehearsals, 'body memory', 'emotion memory' and the kind of recall operating in 'unrehearsed improvisation'. Memory *of* performance constitutes the memory of past events, in part the memory of 'its codes and signs'. He writes:

Aesthetically speaking, we might claim that performative genres and forms encode a kind of general memory of past performance sequences (1999 p.173-174)

He proposes that the particular way in which performers activate and play with the complexities of these doubled memories gives a performance '...its particular nostalgic resonance, or sense of veracity, or ironic distance or radical edge in the present' (p.174). In playback theatre, performers enact the teller's memory (as conveyed in the telling) through the activation of their own individual and collective recollections and through culturally encoded past performance sequences. Through this complexity of recall differing subject positions become available to the performer. It is my proposal that this is likely to loosen and disrupt the particularity of the teller's narrative and so introduce different and (perhaps) competing 'takes' on his experience.

The 'stabbing' gesture does emerge out of the particular constellation of memories I have described, but it is not new: I have used it before. Perhaps because the performers are under pressure to respond quickly, there are gestural patterns or 'past performance sequences' that are fairly regularly employed by the York Company. One may draw a parallel here with the practice of *commedia dell'arte*. In *commedia* improvisations the '*lazzo*' and 'burle' were tried and tested sequences which actors would introduce when they considered it fitting. David Griffiths writes:

The main aspect of these *lazzis* and *burles* is that they would be most thoroughly prepared and rehearsed and honed, so that in performance they could almost certainly guarantee a favourable response from the audience. Such a 'stockpile' would take years to learn and assemble, and would most certainly be jealously guarded from plagiarist rivals. (1998 p.19)

The role of what Keith Sawyer calls these 'ready-mades' (2000) is well recognised in jazz improvisation. Charlie Parker, for example, is said to have made use of a personal repertoire of 100 motifs, each of them between four and ten notes in length (Sawyer 2000). Playback improvisers are no different. I

have identified and listed further examples of familiar sequences employed by the company. These are not playback 'forms': they are not explicitly codified, named or rehearsed by the performers like lazzo, but rather constitute part of the implicit 'language' of the company.

Some familiar sequences employed by Playback Theatre York.

'The meeting'	This is a very familiar sequence; it might be called ' the tentative and gradual meeting'. It is used for the gradual development of trust and might be used to portray, for example, the trust developing between a child and an adult or between a therapist and client. For an example see section 7 of <i>Deliverance</i> in <i>Appendix Four</i> .
'The gift'	This is often used in a story where the teller's actor has achieved some quality or attribute – for example, resilience or creativity. She is given a piece of cloth (usually brightly coloured) to signify the assumption of this quality

'The separation'	This is commonly used in a story in which the teller describes being isolated, bullied or oppressed by others. The teller's actor is separated from the other actors and the space between the protagonist and the rest of the performers is clearly marked and exploited. The group of actors may then taunt the teller's actor or turn their back on her.
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Table Four. Some familiar sequences employed by Playback Theatre York.

Like lazzo, variations of these sequences are often used and adapted and they complicate any straightforward conception of authenticity and the idea of the actor 'being herself'. But they also suggest the simplification of the idiosyncratic narrative, which, if not inflected by other subject positions, is always in danger of caricature. For example, in the exercise which opened this chapter, a female actor characterised the ambitious male by caricaturing his penis: a strategy which erases the complexities of gender and sexuality. It is likely that, under pressure to produce 'something' and in the short duration of the enactment, performers are always at the risk of these kinds of caricature.

Cultural narratives.

In *Deliverance*, the other actors work with the drumbeat and the stabbing movements:

<i>The ‘performer’</i>	The ‘reflecting actor’
<p>5. <i>The other actors form into a chorus to my right, they shout, to the rhythm of the musician’s drum beats, ‘Hide’; ‘Pain’; ‘I can see you’.</i></p>	<p>5. The chorus and the musicians gave me the direction.</p>
<p><i>I recoil from them, pulling one of the chairs to protect me. They throw across other chairs and I build a circle with them.</i></p>	<p>Hiding behind the chairs seemed right to me. Depression might be seen as building a shelter that becomes a prison.</p>
<p><i>A chair slips from my grasp and falls forward with a crash onto the toes of a spectator in the front row. I pull it back onto the stage.</i></p>	<p>I remember worrying that I had gone too far. I felt ashamed, for a second, like a child whose over-exuberance is checked by the adults. (Maybe my ‘shame’ will represent the shame of the teller.)</p>
<p><i>I am now ‘hiding’ behind the chairs, looking out at the other actors as if asking for their help but retreating if they come closer.</i></p>	
<p><i>The chairs are protecting ‘me’ – they are my prison and my shelter.</i></p>	
<p><i>I start to worry about how to get out.</i></p>	<p>I am reliant on the other actors to get ‘me’ out of here. Both the character and the actor need to find a way out.</p>

Notions of mental health are socially constructed (Parker, Georgaca et al. 1995). In writing about schizophrenia Parker states:

The epistemological status of things ...is often contested because such things pretend to represent the real (...) when they actually merely represent items constructed in a political rhetoric (...). Take the notion of 'schizophrenia', for example, which has a status of an object of knowledge (epistemological), which is now supposed to rest in chromosome 5 (ontological) but which is actually distilled from debates in medical psychiatry (moral/political). (1992 p.13)

The playback actor cannot escape the cultural narratives in which he is embedded and which, through language, structure his thought. In 'marking' the teller's narrative as being one, which involved a depressive experience, I made certain assumptions, influenced no doubt, by my experience in psychiatry:

1. *That the teller's experience involved some kind of psychological or physical self-harm and that depressive experience, in some way, involves the 'internalisation' of anger.* My choice of the stabbing movements and my recall of the statue *Notre Dames des Sept Doleurs* seemed to reflect this.
2. *There is an interpretation of the depressive experience as being 'imprisoning'.* Of course the teller described himself being confined to his room during the worst period and the actors make use of this by creating a wall of chairs behind which the protagonist hides.

As the actors build a 'wall' with chairs, a 'gestalt' is offered to the audience'.

The images of the stabbing and the wall of chairs contribute to a different 'takes' on the teller's story. They are images that suggest self-destructiveness, inward preoccupation and isolation. These, I would suggest, are recognisable

and culturally shared images of this aspect of depressive experience. Dorothy Rowe writes about the images of people, who have experienced depression and describe them as feeling

...alone in a space, wrapped tightly in something or pressed down by some heavy weight. The wrapping may be a shroud, or a thick black cloth....however the image is expressed, all the images have one thing in common. The person is enduring a terrible isolation. You are alone in a prison. (1996 p.3)

But the 'wall of chairs' may also suggest opposite characteristics of self-protection and an awareness of the 'outside' world. The polysemy of the image may allow different perspectives on the teller's narrative, provide possibilities of hermeneutic play and emphasise the contingency and mutability of narratives of 'depression'.

3. *There is also an assumption that in depression; feelings and perceptions are inhibited*, rather like Hamlet when he says, 'How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable/ Seem to me all the uses of this world' (Shakespeare 1980 Act 1.Scene 2.). Later in *Deliverance*, for example, as the teller is represented beginning to emerge from his depression, we find the return of feeling marking the beginning of his recovery (see page 227) NB.

The choices I made were ones that seem to flow from my personal identification and empathy with the teller, my experience in psychiatry and the response of the other performers. But there are other 'takes' on the experience of melancholy: a cool appreciation of the patterns of cognition that 'produce' feelings of depression; a socio-economic analysis of poverty and depression; an awareness of how enmeshed family dynamics can 'depress';

or a Laingian perception of mental health problems as a sane response to an insane world. I chose to emphasise the internal experience and symbolic dimensions of 'depression', partly because of my empathic/somatic engagement and partly because to dramatise the internal world of the teller is a familiar approach in the company.

A strong identification with the teller and an almost trance-like absorption in the details of my 'imprisonment' made it difficult to find a way forward in the enactment. Brecht warns of this:

In order to produce A-effects the actor has to discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays. Aiming not to put his audience into a trance, he must not go into a trance himself (...). Even if he plays a man possessed he must not seem to be possessed himself, for how is the spectator to discover what possessed him if he does? (1964 p.49)

Brecht's demand on his actors suggests that the process of identification is potentially one that will mask the socio-political circumstances of the drama. In this sense identification implies a certain 'naturalness' – that the circumstances of the protagonist could be no other, that they are immutable. As Brecht writes in his prologue to *The Exception and the Rule*, 'We ask you expressly to discover/That what happens all the time is not natural' (1930 p.110) One of the strategies that Brecht employed to prevent empathy and identification with the character was to use a narrator in order that the actor detach himself from the character and there would be a 'direct changeover from representation to commentary' (1964 p.47).

<p><i>The 'performer'</i></p> <p>6. Still hiding behind the chairs</p>	<p>The 'reflecting actor'</p> <p>6. As I repeated the phrase I</p>
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<p><i>looking out to the audience as emphatically as I can, I say 'And then my mother died'. I repeat the phrase.</i></p>	<p>hoped that it 'would take me somewhere' or that it would be a cue for one of the other actors to initiate something.</p>
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There is a notable shift in the quality of the enactment here and it turns out to be a fulcrum point in the entire piece. There seems to be a change from the introspective identifications that have been informing the narrative up to this point to a more projective voice. The actor has not assumed the role of the narrator – if he had it would he would have said 'And then his mother died', but nevertheless a gap has opened up. By emerging from his introspective absorption to report this piece of news to the audience, the *character* may signal the beginning of his 'deliverance'. By emerging from his introspective identifications the *actor* finds a way to progress the dramatisation. The partial separation of the actor from an introspective subject position seems to coincide with the emergence of the teller from his depression. The ambiguity of 'And then my mother died' - being from neither narrator nor quite from the 'depressed' and introspective character – may have acted as a signal to the performers that the action is now shifting towards the 'deliverance' of the teller.

The statement in the context of the piece as a whole is highly suggestive. It intimates that the death of his mother was, in some way, the catalyst for recovery. This was not stated directly by the teller, although the timing within the telling of his story may have suggested it. We do not have

access to the psychological dynamics, which marked the beginning of the teller's improvement, however, the drama of the piece demanded a shift and the statement perhaps provided it. In other words, it was a pivotal moment in the dramatic development of the enactment, which implied also a pivotal moment in the experience of the teller. The death of the mother may indeed have been pivotal for the teller; however, the important point to note here is that it is highly probable that aesthetic demands were as strong, if not stronger in guiding the performance than the veracity of the teller's narrative. This point is a crucial one since it throws into doubt uncomplicated notions of the actor's 'loyalty to the story'. If performers cannot be loyal to an 'original' then perhaps, to paraphrase Adam Phillip's statement about psychoanalysis

...we have to translate while suspending our belief in an original; and in the full acknowledgement that we could never get it right....The quest might not be for the Grail, but for the quest itself. (2002 p.147)

Deliverance continues and concludes:

<i>The 'performer'</i>	<i>The 'reflecting actor'</i>
<p><i>7. One of actors comes forward toward me. Slowly she starts to remove one of the chairs. I pull it back, but gradually I allow her to take it way. She reaches out a hand to draw me away. At first I retreat – only very slowly do I reach out toward her. Our hands touch. Quickly withdraw mine as if her hand is too hot and I have been burnt. Now I am standing outside the</i></p>	<p>7. Here is the very familiar sequence, 'the gradual and tentative meeting'. I knew exactly where it would go, and that I needed only to match the pace of the other actor. I knew that it would end up in some image of closer relationship.</p>

<p><i>'shelter' of chairs.</i></p> <p><i>Eventually I allow her to hold my hand. She slowly turns it over. We both look at it. I feel delight in being so close to the actor. I enjoy the attention that I am getting. I look at my hand, I am struck by its fleshiness, its vulnerability, it seemed that there is something precious held in it.</i></p> <p><i>I say, with pleasure and discovery, 'It hurts, and I can feel it!' I repeat this phrase.</i></p> <p><i>I start to remove the black netting that had been placed on my head earlier. It is painful to remove – it is like a plaster being torn from my head.</i></p> <p><i>The other actors surround me now. One had placed a golden coloured cloth on my shoulders. 'What do you see?' asks an actor. 'Deliverance' I reply</i></p>	<p>I enjoyed this moment. My sense of isolation that was activated by playing the character is appeased. At the same time the beginning of the character's 'deliverance' is represented.</p> <p>This phrase felt right to me at that moment. Emerging out of depression the protagonist was beginning to feel again.</p> <p>I was pleased with this image at the time. I reflected that depression could be difficult to remove, like a plaster being torn from the scalp.</p>
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The teller gave us a title, *Deliverance*, and told us a narrative with a certain trajectory. In some ways it is a familiar story – a recognisable 'cultural narrative' (Polkinghorne 1988) or a 'cultural script' (Mattingly 1998); it was a 'resurrection story' - a descent into hell and the return to life; or a story of a

dangerous, treacherous journey and the safe return home. Yet is this process to the detriment of the idiosyncrasy of the teller's story?

Could it be, as Mark Freeman suggests, that our conviction of the unity of selves, or narratives, represented by the unity of the *Deliverance* narrative, for example, '...is a defence against our dis-unity, or a way of grieving over that part of us that dies each and everyday?' (1993 p.68) Is the wish to create a unified and recognisable cultural narrative a foundationalist desire to reduce our anxiety by escaping from the 'game of signification'(Derrida 1978)? There is a paradox here: the creation of recognisable narrative is a compromise with the difference of the other, yet it may be the only way of knowing the other. In relation to literature Adam Newton writes that understanding (or 'getting') someone else's story is

...a way of losing the person as 'real', as 'what he is'; it is a way of appropriating or allegorising that endangers both intimacy and ethical duty. At the same time, however, one's responsibility consists of responding to just this paradox. (1995 p.19)

In a similar fashion to the 'Hollywood' example, given in Chapter One, playback is always at risk of 'appropriating' the particularity of experience for a good story. Freeman recognises this problem in all 'writing of the self' - as a kind of 'antidote' he stresses the importance of 'paying greater attention to the 'discontinuities', 'ruptures', 'fissures' in the narrative. This does not mean

abandoning narrative: it only means that in the interest of practicing something like fidelity to the twists and turns of the past, we ought to make sure that we do not forsake difference for the sake of identity, accident for the sake of a nice smooth story. (1993 p.47-8)

In *Deliverance* these 'ruptures' seemed to take place when memory *in the* performance (for example, of my own personal history or of *Notre Dame des*

Sept Doleurs) or the relative unpredictability of improvised performance unsettled the representation of the narrative (for example, the fleshiness and vulnerability of my hand or the ‘discovery’ of the pain of removing a plaster). Most notable perhaps is the ‘accident’ of the chair falling onto the feet of the spectator (section 5, page 221) NB. Here the referential and the performative meet – my shame (reminiscent of my childhood shame of being corrected for over-exuberance) and sense of disaster seem close to the possible feelings of the teller. This tension between the referential and the performative is a subject that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Six

Improvisation and the Ensemble: an exploration of occasion.

A dialogue is needed between wildness and order. (Tufnell and Crickmay 1990)

'Bruno' had been cast as the teller's father. The teller, Rona, had described a phone call earlier that day in which her father had told her that he was to go into hospital for tests. She talked about the embarrassment between them – a silence in which so much was unspoken.

The 'novelist'

He dragged one of the chairs into the centre of the stage, and drawing himself in as tightly as he could manage, he sat on the chair and waited. He knew that the other actors would be forming a tableau around him but he couldn't see anything, they must all be behind him. He could hear, but not see, movement. It went silent and, it seemed to Bruno, rather dark. They too were waiting, he guessed.

There is a directional instruction that the company had often spoken about. It was that if, as an actor, you do not know what to say it is often effective to say how you are feeling at that moment because it is probably related to the character you are playing. Remembering this, Bruno said,

'I can't see you, its dark here. Where are you?'

Enclosed tightly, as he was by his arms and by the hardness of the chair, Bruno waited. It seemed to him that his words were spreading a cold darkness across the stage and, he guessed, were freezing the actors. He felt a moment of panic. 'They don't know what to do with this,' he thought.

However, he was determined to stay with it, to wait. He could hear movement in the darkness, a quick movement across the stage to somewhere in front and to the left of him. There was silence and then a sound, he wasn't sure, but it was as if someone's lips were moving, mouthing sounds with no words. There was something terrible about this sound and, in the darkness, he felt, for a fleeting moment, a terrible emptiness. The sound had a nightmarish quality, like a child calling for help through sheets of impenetrable glass. He could hear some movement too and he imagined grotesque, spastic movements.

He called out 'I can hear you! Do you need help?' The sound continued, oblivious to his call. He repeated, 'I can hear you! Do you need help?' There was no response.

The exploration of occasion.

In defining improvisation as 'the exploration of occasion', the poet Peter Riley (in Dean 1989) neatly conveys the quality of here-and-now encounter that is characteristic of playback acting in particular and, often, improvisational acting in general. In the previous chapter I examined how the actor responds to multiple performing identities that are potentially available as the enactment develops. It is clear, however, that playback performers are not only 'exploring

the occasion': they are also responding to playback's dramaturgy, previous performance sequences and, crucially, to the teller's narrative. Playback enactments develop out of a tension between the task of representing the teller's story *and* an encounter with here-and-now circumstances on stage. To put this differently, I am referring to a tension between the *referential* and the *performative* functions of theatre (Fischer-Lichte 1997) or the 'performance structure and processual flow' (Lassiter 1995). Or, to use Parker and Sedgewick's colourful language, I am referring to '...the torsion, the mutual perversion, as one might say, of reference and performativity'. (1995 p.3)

This tension or 'torsion' in improvised performance requires a doubled and dynamic awareness on the part of the performers discussed by Viola Spolin.

...it is by direct, dynamic awareness of an acting experience that experiencing and techniques are spontaneously wedded, freeing the student [actor] for the flowing, endless pattern of stage behaviour. (Spolin 1999 p.15)

This complex awareness of experience, technique and narrative opens the teller's story to the destabilising hermeneutic play necessary for a successful playback enactment to take place. Alfonso Montuori notes the etymological root of improvisation as being from the Latin, *improvisus*, or 'unforeseen'. He argues that a '...defining quality of creative improvisation is precisely the generation of the unpredictable, the unusual and the unforeseen' (2003 p.239). The 'unpredictability' of effective playback enactments derives from the degree to which the performers permit the interplay of the unforeseen (the imminent) and the immanent. By 'imminent' I am referring to the here-and-now experiences of the performers in their 'exploration of the occasion'. By 'immanent' I mean the representational forms developed by the

Personal stories in public places: an investigation of playback theatre.
Nick Rowe. March 2005

actors, their personal and cultural histories, and the already-told teller's narrative. In other words, that which is in existence before the enactment commenced.

The complexity of the tensions I am proposing unsettle the teller's narrative. Another way to put this is that effective playback relies on the willingness of the performers to play in the discontinuities and interstices of the narrative. Smith and Dean argue that '...improvised works challenge traditional notions of the self, textuality and representation' (1997 p.4). Improvised works do so not only because of their unpredictability but also because they unsettle the 'the rule of law and regularity in the mind' (Barron 1990 p.249). It may be that improvisation challenges predictable and settled versions of personal and cultural narratives; it loosens established cognitive schemas. It is my proposal that playback enactments are improvised in order to maximise the possibility of this destabilising dynamic – and so create hermeneutic play. However, the opposite is also always possible: the pressures of the improvisation will produce predictability and cliché. This chapter will examine, in part, the conditions necessary to permit an exploration of the occasion and to avoid a 'retreat' into cliché.

In considering the nature of improvisation in playback, we would be better to consider 'authenticity' as being an openness to the range of influences to which the performer is exposed. By this I mean an openness to both the performative and the referential. It is that which creates an unpredictable, polyphonous play with meaning, which characterises successful playback.

I begin by examining in detail those moments in playback performances when the performative and the referential become fused. Such a moment was apparent in *Deliverance* when the chair fell on the feet of the spectator (page 221) and may have represented, in some way, the 'shame' of the teller. As Kershaw tells us 'theatrical mishaps' such as this may 'constitute a kind of theatrical lapsus that can open windows on the vista that connects theatre to the world' (2001 p.203). These moments often provide the most potent instance of the tension between immanence and imminence. They are often the point at which performers are most at risk and, most importantly, they are the moments that are most likely to engender hermeneutic play. Such analyses allow a consideration of the conditions that make an 'exploration of the occasion' possible in playback. I will argue that there are three crucial conditions that permit and sustain moments of fusion between the referential and the performative: 'being in the moment', the importance of the ensemble, and finally, the structuring of the playback event.

Doubled encounters.

Luis Valdez, one of the founders of *El Teatro Campesino*, writes:

There's a dramatic theory.... It is that your dramatic situation, the thing you're trying to portray on stage, must be very close to the reality that is on the stage. You take the figure of DiGiorgio standing on the backs of two farm workers. The response of the audience is to the very real situation of one human being standing on two others. That type of fakery is not imitation. It's theatrical reality that will hold up on the flat bed of a truck. (Sainer 1997 p.24-25)

As DiGiorgio stands on the backs of the two workers we might imagine the audience perceiving the 'actual' weight and burden of the performer 'on the backs' of the farm workers as they also perceive the symbolic burden of

having the farm owners oppressively 'on their backs'. The sequence is working both performatively and referentially.

In playback theatre there is an injunction to performers: 'If you don't know what to do, say what is happening to you at that moment and it is likely that that will be right for the teller'. The farm workers could have shouted, 'I cannot bear it' or 'If we both stand up, he will fall off'. In playback, it is the performative – the live experience of performers onstage – which often informs the direction of the enactment as least as much as reference to the teller's narrative.

In the following example the actor makes use of an encounter with an aspect of the stage environment to represent the story. It is a sequence taken from a Playback Theatre York performance to gay and lesbian young people in Bradford, November 2000.

It was the first 'full story' to be told in the performance. I was cast as the teller's actor. She had recently broken up with her female partner who had been persuaded by her family to end the relationship. She felt angry and hurt. At one point she said 'I can't be who she wants me to be - I can't be a man'.

The Performer

Across the space stand three actors in a line; they are my lover's family. With words and gesture they beckon my lover toward them. She and I are connected by a thin piece of white elastic, which stretches across the stage as she moves away from me toward her family. I feel the increasing tension in my hands as she does so. The elastic is doubled up so that I hold

two pieces. By the time she reaches her family it is fully stretched and I wonder what will happen if I let go....

I let go of one of the connections. There is a rapid succession of snapping, cracking sounds that shock me. The elastic is releasing its energy, unpredictably striking the performers as it does so. I say,

'I have to let go - I can't be what you want me to be'

I still hold on to one piece of elastic. I am not sure whether to release it. The teller had said that she was still in love with her partner and so maybe I should hold on. But I do let go - perhaps because I want to repeat the shock that it produces, or perhaps because I want to say that this relationship is over.

I am left standing alone across the stage from my lover and her family. I look outwards towards the audience - not towards my lover and her family - and as clearly and assertively as I can say:

'I can only be who I am'.

I repeat it - perhaps they didn't hear it clearly and anyway, I can't think of anything else to say.

I bow my head; a trumpet plays mournfully.

The performers improvise with the elastic: with its physical, symbolic and referential qualities. Its properties - explored through moments of 'non-referent' improvisation (Smith and Dean 1997) – inform the 'referent' improvisation.

Crucially, it may be that the performers are able to exploit these moments because the story has already been told. The suspense for the

spectators lies not in the development of the plot since they already know the outcome of the story ; it lies in what the performers do with it. The actor can therefore, 'play' with the echoes and resonances that exist between the story requiring representation and the embodied discoveries that emerge in the encounter. The tension that is felt in the elastic and the shock of its release across the stage is, in itself, both phenomenologically engaging and capable of representing the separation contained in the story. If the elastic is a metaphor, then the actors give space for it to 'live' so that they may explore its own properties, while still being aware of its referential function.

The exploration of the phenomenologically experienced moment opens up a space for play on the meanings that may be attributed to the teller's narrative. For these brief moments the performers are led, not so much by the characters they are playing, nor by the narrative they are representing, but by the actions they are performing/experiencing. There is a temporary disjuncture or rupture in the fabric of the narrative. The 'major building blocks of the apparatus of Western theatrical representation' (Lampe 1995 p.297) – 'acting', 'character' and 'narrative' – are disrupted. This allows new 'takes' on the teller's story; ones that are not totally circumscribed by the limitations of an autonomous controlling ego or the demands of narrative.

Brecht writes of the 'demonstrator' of the street scene:

...the demonstrator should derive his characters entirely from their actions. He imitates their actions and so allows conclusions to be drawn from them. A theatre that follows him in this will be largely breaking with the orthodox theatre's habits of basing the actions on the characters and having the former exempted from criticism by presenting them as an unavoidable consequence deriving by natural law from the characters that perform them. (1964 p.46)

It may be that these moments in playback undermine the limiting determinism of character and narrative and thus present the teller's experience as 'not just taken for granted, not just natural' (Brecht 1964 p.47). In so doing they have the potential to expose the processes of narrative structuring and unsettle the teller's story because they dislodge it from the structures of psychologism and narrative construction.

The surprise is important. The shock of the released elastic surprises the actors. They respond to the surprise while simultaneously maintaining awareness of established performance sequences (the use of elastic as a figurative device to explore relationship is familiar to the York Company) and of their representational 'responsibility'.

The fusion of the referential and the performative in playback performances may also destabilise the particular versions of 'self' that adhere around 'character'. The following example conveys the slippage of identities that takes place in improvised performances. It occurred during a Playback Theatre York performance for the National Institute for Mental Health Conference, Aston Villa football ground, Birmingham in April 2003. The performance took place in a room with a long window overlooking the football ground and a door, positioned stage right, that opened out onto a balcony. Before the performance began I had become aware that all the men in the audience were outside on the balcony looking over the ground. Later, near the end of the performance, a woman told a story of working with a man with mental health problems who had isolated himself. She recounted how she had gradually persuaded him to take part in group activities and how he had

steadily become more able to speak about his life and his experience to others. The conductor called for a 'free improvisation'.

The 'performer'

We step forward. I have an image of pacing about outside on the balcony, in view of the audience through the glass window. I think that this will convey something of his isolation. I quickly step outside and pace about, alternatively turning my back to the audience and banging on the glass. As I do this, I begin to feel foolish – would people think that I had gone out in some sort of distress? Susanna opens the door and comes out to me – she holds out her hand. I wonder, 'Does she think I have cracked up?' She whispers in my ear – I'm not sure to whom she is speaking: to the 'character' or to 'me' as an actor who had 'messed up'.

The 'reflecting actor'

At this point my behaviour was being led as much by my anxiety concerning the dramatic value of my actions as by the task of representing the character. As I entered the room again I was not sure if the audience were watching the character or watching me. What is clear is that the representation of the character and the phenomenology of the performance became tangled.

What is particularly striking in this example are the processes of identification and transference that are activated when performing identities become 'confused'. In the process of transference the past is re-activated in the present, so that the present moment illuminates the past. In this playback example the performative experience of the actor allows the character to be represented. It is the here-and-now experience of the actor that dynamises the character, just as it is the here-and-now experience of the therapist in relationship with the client which dynamises the therapeutic space.

In order for this to take place, the therapist, like the playback actor, resists 'the totalitarian foreclosure of interpretation and meaning' (Brooks 1994 p.71) in order to co-construct the analysand's or teller's past through the transference.

The therapist and the playback actor must both stay open to the live relationship(s) that are present. In order to inhabit this transferential space the playback actor *and* the therapist need to remain in an ambiguous and provisional state, at the threshold or on the margins. The therapist and the client enter 'the semiotic and interpretive space of transference' (Brooks 1994 p.52) in order to re-work and re-experience the past in the present. As Freud put it, transference is a form of 'artificial illness' (in Brooks 1994) - a pathology of *artifice* - which allows the past to be re-worked. In transference, paradoxically, it is an awareness of relationships in the present that re-dynamises those in the past.

Rather as in transference, in playback theatre enactments the past is 're-worked' through the phenomenologically experienced moment. Like the therapist and client, the playback performer needs to remain alert to the

'occasion' – to what is happening moment-by-moment – and to the tension between this and the past as represented through the teller's narrative.

This tension contributes to the possibility of hermeneutic play, which we could propose is a release of multiple meanings through an exploration of the occasion. Perhaps we can argue that a seed of change – of revolution even – is made possible in this heightened awareness. If personal, stable, fixed meanings are reinforced over time, in, what we might call, the executive boardrooms of the ego, then it is possible that the playback enactment unsettles these and exposes them to the effects of the performative. This can only happen when, to some extent, the performers can remain 'betwixt and between' the referential and the performative – that they can exist at the margin or at the threshold.

Performers at the threshold...

Dostoevsky would not have depicted the deaths of his heroes, but the *crises* and *turning points* in their lives; that is, he would have depicted their *lives on the threshold*. And his heroes would have remained internally *unfinalised* (for self-consciousness cannot be finalised *from within*). Such would have been a polyphonous treatment of the story. (Bakhtin 1994 p.96)

*The story has been told. It is a story of love rejected.
The conductor calls for a 'free improvisation'
The performers are standing on the edge
– at a threshold in time and space.*

No one has been cast, no one yet knows who will play whom.

Everyone who listened to the story knows that it will be about 'love rejected', however, the direction that the performers will take is as yet unknown. This is a moment before the characters are created, the signs developed and the

meanings read. There is potential and energy here – it has a certain intensity and it is often one of the times of greatest uncertainty in a performance. This moment is a kind of ‘primordial soup’ full of affect, memory, signifiers and images.

We improvise the moment we cease to know what is going to happen
Setting the mind loose from the ongoingness of everyday life
To find what lies at the edge,
Behind out thinking, seeing.
(Tufnell and Crickmay 1990 p.46)

This ‘at the edge’, ‘threshold moment’ is one of the most fragile ones for the performers - it is now that they are often most vulnerable. In order that this moment of uncertainty is maintained and the opportunities for hermeneutic play optimised, the performers must, to some extent, resist resolution of the problems that face them. Sawyer puts it in a way that stresses the cognitive processes involved: improvisers need to be ‘problem-finding’ rather than ‘problem-solving’ (2000 p.96)

They need to allow the enactment to emerge through the dynamic tension between the task of representing the teller’s story and their encounter with each other in the here and now. This uncertainty increases the level of vulnerability on the part of the actors and their sense of exposure. In addition, the need for them to maintain a high level of awareness of the moment potentially increases their self-consciousness and may heighten feelings of vulnerability and exposure.

I have purposely used the term ‘threshold’ to convey the ‘liminal’, the edge, the ambiguous and the indeterminate so as to draw a connection with Victor Turner’s analysis of liminality:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and the ceremonial... (1969 p.95)

Maria Elena Garavelli, the Argentinean psychodramatist and playback practitioner, puts the notion of being at a threshold in the following way. She terms playback theatre, 'teatro espontaneo':

El teatro espontaneo es un archipelago con puentes y travesias

Un teatro de borramiento de fronteras.

Entre lo narrativo y lo teatral

Entre lo privado y lo publico

Entre lo artistico y lo terapeutico

Entre lo parituclar y lo social

Entre lo esponateo y lo teatral. (2003 p.127)

Translated by my colleague Nick Jones:

'Theatro espontaneo' is an archipelago with bridges and crossings where boundaries are erased.

Between narrative and theatre

Between the private and public

Between the artistic and the therapeutic

Between the personal and the social

Between the spontaneous and the theatrical.

At this threshold or place of 'crossing', the performer and the teller's narrative are potentially at a place of polysemy and polyphony. I qualify my statement by using the word 'potentially', because the level of risk for the performers and, to a certain extent, the teller continually acts as a counterweight to the freedom to explore the occasion. Indeed, Jonathan Fox writes that playback actors often fail because they fear 'liminality' (1994 p.101). At the threshold - at the 'entrance' where we may perhaps be 'entranced' - there is certainly

possibility, uncertainty and unpredictability. There is a sense of the 'provisionality' to which Schechner (1993) refers in relation to playing – there is '...unsteadiness, slipperiness, porosity, unreliability, and ontological riskiness' (p.39).

The 'writer':

It is evident from the last paragraph that as I write I find myself wanting to say two incommensurable things simultaneously. The actor is free to improvise at the threshold but yet she is not. She is constrained by the other performers, playback's dramatic conventions, the task of representation and her own state of mind in the moment. There is a paradox here. The paradox is that she is both constrained and liberated. Those things that constrain - the context; the ensemble; the 'rules and conventions' of playback; the presence of the teller - are also those things that animate.

What conditions make it possible for the performers to remain at the threshold – or to put this another way, how do they maintain the tension between the referential and the performative so that they can explore the occasion *and* represent the teller's narrative? To use Keith Johnstone's phrase, how do they 'go with the flow' (1999 p.341)? Or to how do they maintain an '...openness to contact with each other and [a] willingness to play' (Spolin 1999 p.25)?

Being in the moment .

Fox asks playback performers to ‘...be brave enough to enter the moment with a mind free from all protective considerations’ (1994 p.171). The extent to which the ‘mind’ can ever be free from *all protective considerations* is, of course, debatable. The notion of the spontaneous ‘happening’, unfettered by psychological, social and historical constraints, is always a rhetorical one. It is the rhetoric of a particular type of ideological yearning. It is a yearning for the live and the unmediated – for ‘actuals’ as Schechner terms it (1994 p.51). Despite the careful caveats we must place on the notion of entering the moment, playback theatre is nevertheless an improvised form – one that requires a heightened awareness of the moment – because improvisation can allow the greatest possibility of hermeneutic play, of an explosion of meanings and perspectives.

The paradox of Zeno’s arrow points to the impossibility of conceiving of the present moment, since the arrow, in motion, can never be said to be in the present since that moment is infinitesimally small. Nevertheless, most writers on improvisation regard being present in the moment as crucial. For example, Johnstone (1999 p.171) encourages his students to keep their attention on ‘what actually is happening’. Spolin maintains that ‘...the intuitive can only respond in immediacy – right now’ (1999 p.26) and David Warrilow tells us,

Improvisation only means that which is not foreseen, that which appears in the moment. Something is always appearing in the moment. The point is how much attention do you pay to it. (in Lassiter 1995 p.317)

This absorption in the moment, characterised by Csikszentmihalyi (1988) as 'flow', or by the playback trainer, Deborah Pearson, as 'allowing the story to emerge' is one which seems crucial to effective improvisational acting, as indeed it is in the psychodramatic tradition. The emphasis on here and now awareness is clear, for example, in the work of Jacob Moreno. He writes that his first conflict with the work of Freud concerned the 'dynamics of the moment',

The experiences which take place continuously in the context of the Here and Now have been overlooked, distorted or entirely forgotten [in Freudian theory]. Therefore, early in my writings... I began to emphasise the moment, the dynamics of the moment, the warming up to the moment, the dynamics of the present, the Here and Now, and all its immediate personal, social and cultural implications. (1987 p.4)

He goes on to say that he is not writing from a purely philosophical perspective but from a therapeutic one. He draws attention to the here and now reciprocal 'encounter' (1987 p.4) between participants in the therapy group. Moreno's emphasis points toward an intense awareness of others in encounter. It is a crucial issue I will pick up later in this chapter.

Despite an emphasis on the awareness of the moment in playback performing, I am not proposing that performers must, or indeed could, achieve a state of ahistorical awareness of the present. We must be careful of fetishising the present moment, in a desire to recover the real from the 'mediatized' (Auslander 1999) and conclude that it is possible to obtain an ahistorical contact with the moment. I agree with Auslander when he writes:

It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media. (1999 p.40)

Additionally, as I have already shown in the previous chapter, performers are deeply influenced by memories and past performances. Nevertheless, I want to argue that playback requires this now-awareness, in tension with the task of representing the teller's story, in order to be effective. Fox expresses this clearly in a section reminiscent of Moreno. He describes this now-awareness and, in doing so, points to the tension between the referential and the performative:

...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. (1994 p.101)

It seems, however, that we cannot speak of being 'in the moment' directly without, in some way, fetishising or reifying it, we can only point to what may be the signs that an actor is 'in the moment'. These seem to be characterised by flexibility, responsiveness and openness. I present my own list drawn from experience and discussion with other playback performers.

- Flexibility to the changing circumstances on stage.
- A high level of physical and verbal responsiveness to the other performers.
- An ability to relinquish a planned direction in response to changing circumstances.
- Openness to personal memory, identification, emotion, physicality and sensation.

The 'novelist' illustrates this:

The 'novelist'

Bruno is asked to play Rona.

Bruno felt he was bursting. His heart was thumping hard and he had a sick feeling. He knew Rona would choose him and he knew what he would do. Well no, that wasn't quite true; it would be more accurate to say that he had no worries about what he would do. An insistent energy would carry him. Amanda's music was feeding that energy, viscerally changing Bruno, and he used it to find his place on the stage. He dragged one of the chairs into the centre of the stage, and drawing himself in as tightly as he could manage, he sat on the chair and waited. He knew that the other actors would be forming a tableau around him but he couldn't see anything, they must all be behind him. He could hear, but not see, movement. It went silent and, it seemed to Bruno, rather dark. They too were waiting, he guessed.

There is a directional instruction that the company had often spoken about. It was that if, as an actor, you do not know what to say, it is often effective to say how you are feeling at that moment because it is probably related to the character you are playing. Remembering this, Bruno said,

'I can't see you, its dark here. Where are you?'

Karin Gissler, a Swiss playback practitioner, has summarised the characteristics of effective playback improvisers. Her list bears much similarity to my own:

...the ability to translate thoughts into physical shapes and images quickly and clearly; to say yes to what develops during a scene; to support your partner; to move the story forward; to be sensitive to the unfolding meaning of a story and to carry it further. (2002 p.7)

Playback performers offer a response to the teller's narrative. That response requires them to be flexible enough to experience and draw upon a range of perspectives in the enactment. Anticipating that threshold moment, however, is likely to produce fear, anxiety and a sense of vulnerability on the part of the performer. In many ways it is a necessary vulnerability, without which the performance will lack energy. It is the correlative to necessary awareness, but in the actor it can produce fear of humiliation, of exposure and of emptiness.

A paradox: being alive in the moment requires an acceptance of death.

Ruth Quinn argues that the improvising, 'performative self' is released from the deadly hand of self-judgement and self-aggrandisement by '...an old close friend with archetypal significance. This is Death.' (2003). She goes on to argue that,

A strong umbilical attachment to death means that we can move forwards into a new 'awake self', an alive self who is prepared to work with the unknown and court true spontaneity and improvisation. (Quinn 2003)

As Turner recognised, 'liminality is frequently likened to death' (1969 p.95).

There certainly seems to be, in the literature of improvisation, a sense of

transience. For example, to Johnstone, 'Theatresports is disposable theatre'(1999 p.63); or to Dario Fo, the aim is to create

...a throwaway theatre, a theatre which won't go down in bourgeois history, but which is useful, like a newspaper article, a debate or a political action. (in Frost and Yarrow 1990 p.74)

As Read tells us '...theatre is the transient art *par excellence*' (1993 p.12) and improvised theatre dies as soon as it is born. Memory of it fades quickly – in my experience more quickly than other kinds of experiences. Unless the enactment is regularly recalled or recorded in some way, it is lost. As Phelan writes: '...it may be that theatre and performance respond to a psychic need to rehearse for loss, and especially for death' (1997 p.3).

The 'writer'

Sometimes I find this painful. For someone brought up to over-value recognition and who secretly harbours the need for accolades, the transience of playback can be a frustration. Perhaps this is why I write this thesis. It is a kind of monument.

There is paradox in Quinn's proposal – to live in the moment means to acknowledge and embrace death. This is what Fred Harris is referring to when he writes to fellow playback practitioners:

...the more we face the limitations that constrain us in life, the more fully we experience the courage to live. I refer to this state into which classical tragedy wakes us as 'mortal awareness' because it is about being mindfully mortal: vulnerable to fate and destined to die, yet committed to life and its strivings. (2002 p.8)

Benjamin (1970) believed that oral storytelling was dying out because our sense of the 'epic side of truth, wisdom' (1970 p.87) was being lost, presumably through the reductionism of science and the privileging of 'information'. He goes on to say that the loss of this wisdom (*die Weisheit*), leads to a weakening of our idea of eternity and, by implication, death. The storyteller he writes: 'is the man (sic) who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story' (1970 p.108).

Perhaps that partly explains our fear of 'entering the moment' and the 'fear of liminality'. Perhaps that is one reason why audiences often seem a little frightened by the storytelling and enactments in playback performances. Perhaps we know that it will play with and disrupt our own monuments against death – our autobiographical narratives. For whatever reason to remain 'in the moment' – to 'explore the occasion' - can produce a sense of vulnerability in the performers. It is the ensemble which both safeguards and maintains that necessary vulnerability and exposure.

The Ensemble.

The 'teller'

The days following the death of my mother were a kind of 'confinement'. Removed from the everyday demands of my work I took time, as an Australian playback friend had advised me, to 'let it in'. Rather like the arrival of a baby in the household, the curtains were metaphorically drawn; the usual circadian rhythms of day and night were disrupted. The house was decorated with cards of condolence and people

took the opportunity to write or say words of tenderness and intimacy that were both welcome and out of the ordinary. It was a time of separation, a liminal space of 'betwixt and between'. Some – mainly those at the edges of my social network, but not exclusively – were fearful of me, as if I was dangerous or fragile and likely to shatter if they spoke a clumsy word.

I had lost both parents. I was now, as some friends told me, an orphan. In the middle of the night as I made my way to the toilet I would become aware of a silence. It was as if the sound of my parents had been extinguished. Paradoxically I was aware of their presence by their complete irrevocable absence.

It seemed to me, as it had done when my father had died three years previously, that those characteristics of the lost parent that, in some way, I acknowledged as my own, came to the fore. The death of my mother provoked feelings that seemed to lie beyond words – in the pre-verbal pre-cognitive world of the small infant.

I found myself wanting to reach for the ineffable - the fall of light on a leaf – I wanted to meditate, pray, reach for the spiritual. Early in the morning following her death, unable to sleep, I walked into York and took photographs of the Minster.

I had to return to the 'world'. One way in which that return was marked was the first playback rehearsal. As I left the house for the rehearsal on a Sunday morning following her death in late January, I could faintly smell the spring. I recalled the feelings of freedom of going off with the company – like the trip to Poland in 1997. These feelings were tantalising – they disappeared almost as soon as I became aware of them.

I knew what story I wanted to tell at the rehearsal – it was about the silence in the middle of the night. When I had the opportunity I told it. The conductor asked me what the voices of my parents sounded like. Later she told me she had wanted to hear their voices and then to have them silenced. I found it very difficult to answer the question. I said ‘Loving and mildly critical’ but I wasn’t very happy with that.

As the enactment began I found myself longing for silence. I wanted the actors to listen to the silence. All I wanted was that they would hear the silence with me - perhaps in respect of my Mum and Dad, but more profoundly, in solidarity with me. What I wanted was a kind of ritual - like those two minute silences ‘for the dead of both wars’ – in which I could ‘mark’ their absence together with the company.

When the enactment finished I told everyone about my wish for silence and we discussed the problems of conveying the quality of silence through theatre. What I did not say - perhaps because it seemed mawkish or too indulgent - was that what I wanted was simply to be silent with them - together to mark the absence and my loss.

It is my proposal that the emphasis on the ensemble in playback theatre and the stress on attending to the relationships between the performers is designed to enable a high level of ‘now awareness’ on the part of the actors and to provide them with some sense of psychological safety. A group of players who pay robust attention to what is happening between each other are more likely to be open to the moment-by-moment dynamics on stage and that openness will allow a degree of hermeneutic play, which would not be possible without it. Performers need to rely on each other during these

moments of uncertainty. They need to trust the other performers sufficiently to be able to take risks, make 'offers' and wait for the enactment to develop.

However, this can be vertiginous and psychologically disorientating.

Ensemble, with its disciplines, may engender the conditions for hermeneutic play but may also operate to contain and support its more disruptive aspects.

Personal positioning.

It is important, particularly in the light of my own deep involvement with the Playback Theatre York Company, to acknowledge my own position in relation to the ensemble and its role within playback. The reader will find listed below a personal 'manifesto' concerning the ensemble. It will be one of the tasks of this chapter to expose this to scrutiny.

The 'apologist'.

- *An ensemble that has worked together for some time is more likely to present good quality playback theatre.*
- *Playback eschews a 'star-system' - in fact a desire for personal aggrandisement is contradictory to the playback process.*
- *In order to perform effectively playback actors need to maintain clear, honest and robust communication between each other.*
- *Playback companies need to spend time attending to the relationships within the group in order that this communication is fostered.*
- *Nevertheless playback companies are performing companies not sensitivity groups and a balance needs to be found between the internal dynamics of the company and the disciplines of playback performance.*

- *The playback form can be used to ‘work on’ the internal dynamics of the group - that is tensions and feelings within the group can be explored through the playback form.*
- *Playback performers need to be acutely aware of the here-and-now circumstances as they develop in enactments.*
- *That the pleasures of working with a company over many years provides as much of a reason to be involved as the actual performances.*
- *As taken from the lexicon, we must ‘listen to each other’.*

Collaborative emergence.

In the course of a discussion concerning the importance of the ensemble in playback with the Sydney Playback Theatre Company in July 1998, one of the members said ‘If we are not in relationship with each other we are only acting’.

The pejorative use of the term ‘acting’ in playback discourse is one key way in which the form constitutes its ‘otherness’. It does so by theorising a type of ‘conventional’ acting, which lacks ‘authenticity’, relies on ‘artifice’, and is not drawn from the self. It is notable that, in order to stress the importance of the ensemble, the speaker used the hyperbolic epithet ‘only acting’. She could have argued that without ‘relationship’ between performers the performance would be of poor quality, or the audience would not be engaged or the teller’s story would not be fully realised. The use of ‘acting’ here – just as in the example cited in the previous chapter – is an unconvincing attempt to mark playback’s difference. Accordingly, I will not continue with the use (and abuse) of ‘acting’ evident here but rather concentrate on the sense of the

statement – the importance of the performers being in relationship with each other. This is certainly the case in Playback Theatre York where an unsatisfactory enactment may often be put down to a lack of contact between the actors. For example, recording the early moments of a performance I wrote in my notes, ‘I was not looking at the others – we were not aware of each other. It was every man [sic] for himself.’ (recorded 8th April 1998)

What is called for in playback performances is a moment-by-moment connection between the performers. Enactments develop out of the collaborative efforts of the ensemble; usually no one performer provides the dominant voice. Not even the teller’s actor is given authoritative control of the direction of the piece. A process of what Sawyer calls ‘collaborative emergence’ is taking place. Although Sawyer’s analysis relates to children’s play, a brief adapted survey will support my thesis. Collaborative emergence is characterised by the following qualities. It is unpredictable and contingent; ‘...it emerges from the successive actions of all the participants’ (Sawyer 2002 p.340), and so is not the conscious creation of any one person, and, crucially,

...the emergent narrative cannot be analysed solely in terms of the child’s [actor’s] goal in an individual turn, because in many cases a child [actor] does not know the meaning of her own turn until the other children [performers] have responded. (p.340-1)

Narrative and meaning are created not through the authoritative control of one perspective or voice, but through the multiple consciousnesses of the performers. Meaning is not so much immanent but is emergent, discovered through the response of others, and, one might add, by the interpretive work of the audience. What I am describing here is *spontaneous communitas*.

Turner quotes, as an example, a passage from the existential theologian Martin Buber, who was, incidentally, an associate of Moreno and is of

importance to Fox. As cited by Turner, Buber describes community as 'a dynamic facing of the others, a flowing from I to Thou'. In so doing, Turner writes, he 'lays his finger on the spontaneous, immediate, concrete nature of communitas' (1969 p.127). The relational and unpredictable nature of playback enactments certainly seems to bare similarity to Turner's formulation. Consider this example, which took place at a Playback Theatre York performance in Halifax in December 1999 to an audience of users of mental health services and professional who work with them.

The performer

Early in the performance a man in his mid-forties referred to a story I had told at the outset of the performance concerning the illness of my mother. He spoke about this with some emotion. He glanced at me a few times as he spoke and I was aware of nodding in recognition as he did so.

He comes forward to tell. I know he will choose me.

He tells us about the death of his own mother 11 years previously. He had been in hospital for depression and she had visited him regularly. When he was discharged he received a phone call to say that she was very ill and he should visit her soon. He describes being in two minds. It was his 'pay day' and he had to collect his money. He decided to visit his mother. This was the last time he saw her, she died a short time after his visit.

He chooses me to play him and Greta to be his mother.

I stand waiting for the others. I am trembling and feel close to tears. When the music stops I walk out to stage right and face the audience. I see Greta/mother to my right. She is smiling. I cannot look at her.

I say: 'It is December 1999 and it is very close to Christmas. Now I want to remember my mother and to tell you about her'.

Voices from uncast actors behind whisper: 'She's here to see you, look at her'. My mind is blank, she is smiling, I walk toward her dazed. The voices behind me call out 'She has a gift'.

She is holding a yellow cloth. Everything seems very slow, very deliberate. I worry that everyone will know that I don't know what to do. I feel foolish. I look into her eyes. I still can't think of much to say except 'I'm glad I have seen you'.

Greta/Mother says. 'Here, son' and hands me the fabric. I hear my own mother's voice in hers.

The other actors move in front of her. They draw her away stage left. She is disappearing. I plead 'Mum, Mum! Please don't go I've got more I want to say to you'.

I am left on my own. I have closed my eyes. It is silent. I am holding this piece of yellow cloth. The music plays, it sounds plaintive. I open my eyes, it feels different – more definite somehow. The other actors have draped mother in a purple cloth. They surround her. I try to approach but they hold up their hands to indicate that I should come no closer.

I look at the yellow fabric in my hands and caress it. Voices from the other actors call out, 'Remember her' and 'Tell us'. They repeat this. Finally, after what seems like a long time, I look to the audience and say

'It is now a long time since my mother died. I still remember her. I will not forget her.' Indicating the yellow fabric, I say 'I still have this. She gave it to

me. I will always have it. There are still things I want to say to her. I want to say thank you to her. I want to tell her that I love her’.

We all turn to the teller.

As I face the teller I am aware of a deep sense of connection and recognition. He stumbles to thank me.

Such moments of phenomenological contact as experienced here are, in my experience, relatively common in playback performances. Hermeneutic play depends upon these very brief gaps in the referential. Turner writes that the attributes of liminality

...are necessarily ambiguous since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. (1969 p.95)

The complex moment of identification as I face Greta and see her/the teller’s mother/my own mother is a kind of ‘dynamic facing of the other’ – a recognition of alterity. No matter how fleetingly, it opens up the narratives of mother/adult-son relationships to scrutiny. Furthermore, as Baz Kershaw argues these moments of spontaneous *communitas* ‘...may well become an implicit, subversively articulate ‘commentary’ on the dominant discourses, the *status quo*, of its environment’ (1999 pp 77-78). In a centre for users of mental health services a man recalls his mother and tells us all of his sense of loss.

As we discovered later, one or two of the workers at the centre were concerned that such strong feelings would ‘disturb’ people and that they (the workers) would be left to ‘pick up the pieces’. As I shall describe in *Chapter Seven*, the telling of personal stories in public places often stimulates a debate about the ‘proper’ place for revealing personal material and so

Personal stories in public places: an investigation of playback theatre.
Nick Rowe. March 2005

dramatises the contested relationship between the personal and the public. In my experience with Playback Theatre York, this is particularly the case in mental health environments.

I am suggesting that the encounter between Greta/mother and I is a form of spontaneous communitas, but Turner makes clear that '...communitas can be grasped only in relation to structure' (1969 p.127). He writes in a remarkable passage that bears the imprint of gender stereotyping and is redolent of structuralist thought:

Spontaneous communitas is nature in dialogue with structure, married to it as woman is married to a man. Together they make up one stream of life, the one affluent supplying power, the other alluvial fertility. (1969 p.140)

As expressed here the formulation is altogether too neat - the other as Derrida would say, haunts each pole of the binary. The complex play of 'difference' is eradicated in Turner's argument. I am surprised by the 'presence' of Greta/mother, yet my 'encounter' with her can never escape signification; pure, unmediated encounter may be an unachievable desire.

The 'writer'

I keep on mis-typing Greta/mother as Great/mother. It is as if the dynamics within the enactment are still alive in writing about it.

The requirement on Greta and me to represent the teller's story and to play their parts never disappears but rather is inflected, moment-by-moment, by phenomenological experience. I would suggest that it is the task of the ensemble to create the conditions where moments of collaborative

emergence can be shaped into theatre capable of responding to the teller's narrative.

The work of the ensemble in playback theatre.

The stress on the ensemble in playback discourse seems to have two main aims. Firstly, there is a belief that the quality of the relationships in the ensemble will improve the quality of performance, and secondly, that the ensemble offers to its members collective support, intimacy and the opportunity for personal exploration, that is, in itself, an important reason to be involved. Often these two aims are complimentary in the sense that the intimacy developed within the ensemble supports and enhances performance. In my experience, and as Sarah Urech (1996) notes, occasionally they seem contradictory: for example, when the requirements and stresses of performance come into conflict with the need to pay attention to the quality of relationships within the group.

This emphasis on the internal relationships between performers became very clear to me on a research visit to Australian playback theatre companies in 1998. I was struck, for example, by the Perth Company's willingness to speak openly about conflicts and relationships within the group. Deborah Pearson, one of the key figures in the early life of the Company, spoke about

the downside of company life – everyone bringing up their dirty laundry and showing it again and again. Having to do that boring stuff week after week without getting on and doing things. (1998)

The Brisbane Company described how, in their early work together,

we were very nice to each other and covered up a lot of agendas that were there. We struggled with giving feedback to each other, without

getting devastated or 'dumping on the critiquer'.(Brisbane Playback Theatre 1998)

They went on to tell me that they aim for a co-existence of 'robustness and vulnerability' in their company life, in which they could give both robust feedback and recognise the vulnerability of each other. All the companies I spoke with reinforced the importance of 'working on their own process'. This involved acknowledging the tensions and disagreements within the group and the blocks to improvisation experienced by individual members. Urech (1996) in her unpublished essay entitled 'Woven Together by Love: a look at company life in playback theatre' and written for the School of Playback Theatre, stresses the importance of the 'attention to group process'. She takes her title from Julian Beck's statement:

In the community there are always problems, conflicts and sickness. The community is unified (woven together) by love, finding persistent expression in warm affection and physical contact. (cited by Urech 1996 p.1)

She devotes a significant proportion of her essay to this aspect of playback practice arguing that 'attention to group process is integral to having a well rounded, healthy playback company' (p.15). It is perhaps instructive to note in passing the particular ideology that may lie behind such phrases as 'well-rounded' and 'healthy', since they suggest a yearning for wholeness and organicism and allude to the properties of authenticity that I have already subjected to critique. Such hopes may be difficult to achieve and sustain in the diversity and internationalism of the contemporary playback scene.

This correspondence between the 'health' of the group and the quality of performance needs to be explored, however. As Schechner writes:

There is, unfortunately, no easy relationship between the quality of life in the group and the quality of the group's work ... At some level the life of the group determines the life of the work. But it is necessary to be delicate and discriminating before announcing what the relationship is between group life and work life. (1994 pp.271-2)

There is always the possibility that groups will 'turn inward' and pay more attention to their internal life than to the requirements of performance. The tension between attending to internal group dynamics and preparing for performance may often be a complimentary one. However, there are times when they come into conflict. It is a conflict, which is sometimes expressed in Playback Theatre York as being between 'the therapists' and the 'theatre people'. In this formulation, crudely put, the 'therapists' are more interested in personal process and the 'theatre people' in performance quality. In my experience as a practitioner it is a conflict that is most evident in rehearsal.

A playback rehearsal is performing at least two tasks simultaneously. On the one hand, it gives company members the opportunity to tell and watch enactments of their own experiences and receive support from one another. Many companies have been together from a number of years (12 years in the case of the York Company) and it is common for members to have shared all the usual life experiences – childbirth and childcare, bereavement, marriage and separation and so on. Many members feel this is as important to them as performing. My wish for the York Playback Company to share the grief of the loss of my mother is an example of this. On the other hand, however, rehearsals give an opportunity for practice and experimentation with new forms. The tension between these two aims is most evident at the conclusion of most rehearsal enactments of the York Company when the teller is given the opportunity to reflect on the performance and the rest of the company give

their personal response to the teller's narrative. These discussions are followed by a further period of debate on the technicalities of the performance. There are times when these two functions of performance come into conflict. For example, the teller is distressed and yet there is still a wish for the performers to receive feedback and to discuss technique. The tension between these two functions in playback rehearsals mirrors, in some ways, that between the referential and the performative: technique and personal experience seem to be in tension throughout the playback process. There have been times in the history of Playback Theatre York when it has been difficult to achieve a 'balance' between the need to attend to the relationships of the group and the requirements of performance. The following two examples are chosen because they were, in my history with the group, points at which the group seemed to be under the greatest pressure. In both episodes the relationships within the group were strained because of the performance demands placed upon them. The first incident occurred when the company was asked to perform for British Airways in 1998; the second during the Seventh International Playback Theatre Conference hosted by the Company in York in 1999.

British Airways

The performance marked a number of firsts for the group. It was the first commercial contract for the company and it was the first in which a significant fee was to be paid. This meant two things. Firstly, it constituted a genuinely lucrative and exciting prospect for performers and not surprisingly, there was a greater wish to perform than usual. Secondly, there was an

added pressure to do a good performance and so the uncomfortable issue of who should perform was discussed with far more deliberation than was usual.

In a discussion held some weeks before the performance, those who felt that the 'best' actors should be chosen argued that we were naïve in not making hard casting choices. There were others who felt distressed by this view and argued that we should not go down the road of 'grading' performers.

From my own perspective it was a distressing meeting. The deeply submerged anxieties about who was better than whom in the company rose to the surface. Would I not be good enough for this performance?

It was a tense period in the life of the company and thorny issues that were raised took many months to work through.

The Seventh International Playback Theatre Conference, York, 1999.

It was 'the British Airways experience' that coloured our discussions during the International Playback Theatre Conference hosted by the company in early August 1999. The size and workload of the conference put a great deal of strain on the group and although we had arranged beforehand to spend time in the 'potting shed' (our term for taking time together out of the conference) this did not, in the event, happen. We had arranged to perform on the Thursday evening and because we were the hosts there was a great deal of people who were keen to see us. Late on the Wednesday evening we met

to decide who would perform the following day. In my experience it was the most acrimonious meeting we have had. Members were sensitised by the British Airways experience and felt that the quality of their acting was being judged. Others quickly removed themselves from consideration by saying that they did not wish to perform. A final decision was only made when one person walked out of the discussion in distress. The group did not have the time nor, because of their tiredness, the energy to attend to the feelings that were evoked by the meeting.

In both these examples, it was the perceived heightened need for a 'good performance' that caused stress within the group. Some members noted that the company did not have these arguments when considering less 'prestigious' performances: to users of mental health services, for example. It was almost as if we had been 'corrupted' my money and prestige — by the 'filthy lucre' of commercialism and the ethic of individualism from which we felt we had escaped.

In the year that followed the company spent a considerable amount of time discussing strategies that could be employed to deal with situations like this in the future. To address the problem of deciding who would perform it was suggested that the conductor should 'choose his/her cast'. This was rejected as being too onerous a responsibility for the conductor. Finally, it was decided that if there were more actors that wished to perform than 'places', a decision would be reached by drawing names out of a hat. With respect to the matter of payment, the company decided to initiate a 'share system', which would ensure that performers received a twice-yearly equal payment

irrespective of the fee that was being received by the company for individual performances. At the time of writing (October 2003) these two policies remain in place.

In order to maintain the vulnerability and openness necessary for the performers to 'explore the occasion' and to engage in hermeneutic play, playback ensembles need to pay considerable attention to the personal and emotional lives of the group. In order to maintain the quality of their performances, companies must also pay attention to technique and form. In my experience with Playback Theatre York, these two may operate in a complimentary relationship with each other. However sometimes they do come into conflict and when that happens the collective lives of companies are severely tested and shaken.

Playback and ritual.

One aspect of the 'immanent' to which I have not yet paid sufficient attention is that of playback theatre's conventions of framing. The form is a relatively simple and stable one and, by and large, performing companies do not veer too far from the standard playback conventions. For Fox these conventions constitute rules, which invest playback with a ritual quality.

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. (1999 p.128)

Throughout this essay, entitled 'A Ritual for our Time', Fox is making the point that what he calls the ritual elements of playback hold (p.124) or contain the vulnerabilities of both the performers and the audience. The ritual, he seems to be saying, allows for the liminal and the spontaneous. The paradox is that spontaneity is only possible when there is a controlling ritual. As Fox puts it, ritual '...provides the safety and paradoxically the power' (1999 p.129). Fox is not alone in recognising the importance of structures in permitting play. Winnicott (1989) recognises the paradox when he speaks of the 'play frame' and Schechner expresses it succinctly when he writes that there is

...an axiom of frames which generally applies in the theatre: the looser an outer frame, the tighter the inner, and conversely, the looser the inner, the more important the outer. (1994 p.14)

It is not my intention here to interrogate the metaphor of the 'frame', which, of course, is derived from Bateson (1955) and Goffman (1974). Suffice to say that it may be too stable and inflexible a structure to convey the complexities and excesses of performance. It is Fox's use of 'ritual', that I find problematic.

Proposals for the efficacy of ritual appear regularly in the literature of performance studies (McKenzie 2001 p.49) and in the work of dramatherapists such as Sue Jennings (1998). If we accept ritual to be, as Schechner does, '...a way that people remember...[and in which] memories [are] encoded into actions' (2002 p.45), then a case might be made for its inclusion in theorising about playback theatre. Furthermore, my analysis of playback performing in this chapter seems to suggest that some sort of ritual process may be operating to allow a 'state of vulnerability' (p.57) on the part of the performers. To put this another way, one may theorise that the ritual process allows a kind of effacement by which performers are stripped of their

quotidian identities so that they can enter ‘...a time-place where they are not-this-not-that...’ (p.57) – a proposal which incidentally leads us to the rather redundant conclusion that all theatre is ritual.

The claim for ritual has also been closely related to efficacy. As Schechner writes ‘The ambition to make theatre into ritual is nothing other than the wish to make performance efficacious, to use events to change people.’ (1994 p.59). Consider the following passage written by Fox:

...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. (1999 p.134)

The trouble with these familiar claims for ritual in relation to performance lies in their familiarity and their ubiquity. They have become a way of avoiding analysing and appreciating the complexity of performance. Fox’s words have a kind of semi-mystical appeal; they dull thought. Singularity has masked the polyvocality of playback performances. The complex levels of reflexive awareness built into playback theatre performances are collapsed by the use a ritualist perspective.

McKenzie in his analysis of what he calls the ‘liminal-norm’ recognises the problem of the ubiquity of ritual and its associated concepts:

The paradigm’s liminal-norm, while enabling us to theorise transgressive and resistant performance and our own contested situation, has simultaneously prevented us from sensing the power of performance. (2001 p.165-6)

Taking his critique from Clifford Geertz , Kershaw argues that the ‘ritualist’ tendency usurps ‘...the creativity of practice by recommending the primacy of

schema' (1999 p.107). The complex articulations of performance are forced into an undifferentiated structure. In doing so the ritualist approach elides the 'ideological macro-context' and 'suppresses reflexive awareness of the values shaping [a performance's] interpretations' (Kershaw 1999 p.120).

Rituals are characterised by repetition and by the enactment of clearly proscribed roles. This does not, I would suggest, account for the unpredictability and complexity of improvised performance. What's more, it seems to me that the theorising of playback as ritual ignores and masks cultural as well as individual difference. Consider this statement by Fox: 'Playback's grounding in ritual is perhaps a reason why it can flourish in many cultures, with different artistic and social traditions.' (1999 p.129)

I would suggest that Fox is not referring to ritual here but to playback's formal conventions. The formal conventions of playback theatre seems to be highly portable across different cultures, whereas ritual is always contingent and contextualised. The simple structure of the playback performance does indeed seem to be flourishing in many different cultures. However, in my view, one cannot claim that these relatively simple 'rules' of playback constitute ritual. Ritual is not, by virtue of its cultural contingency, easily transferable across cultures. Rituals carry canonical messages (Rappaport 1999) that are embedded in their practice and culture. I would argue that playback does not, or should not, carry canonical messages and would go further to suggest that the danger of conceiving of playback as ritual lies in the implicit assumption that it, therefore, carries some sort of truth, or ideology or system of belief. Such an assumption runs counter to the desire within, for example, the

International Playback Theatre Network to promote diversity and inclusiveness.

Ben Chaim alludes to the collapse of theatre in the face of ritual in her analysis of distance in theatre. Her argument is that distance between the viewer and the viewed is a necessary condition for theatre and that once that is collapsed (for, example, in some of the paratheatrical work of Grotowski):

[T]here is no longer a theatrical production on the 'outside' of the viewer, but a religious ritual that immediately includes all the human beings present. (1984 p70-71)

In addition to the loss of the reflexivity of theatre, once we conceive of a playback performance as a kind of ritual, we seem to implicate the spectator in an event that they most likely did not sign up for. The individual member of the audience becomes an unknowing celebrant. This is indeed a disturbing conclusion that is perhaps inevitable when such a totalising explanatory tool is employed.

Where is the conductor?

Anthony Kubiak writes the following:

All the talk of multiplicities, of the body without organs, of fragmentation and decenteredness ignores the real distress and terror of those who actually experience the world in this way. (Kubiak 1998 p.99)

His words are challenging. The strategy throughout this thesis has been to de-centre playback, to destabilise its discourse and to foment multiplicities. In doing so I have needed to play down the role of the conductor (the parental unifier?) within performances. I imagine those reading my work asking 'Where is the conductor?' Maybe like a child, I have wanted to kick over the traces of the Fox/Salas parent dyad. It has certainly seemed to me that the role of the

conductor in playback performances has been over-stated, perhaps because those who write about it tend to be conductors.

I have argued that playback theatre destabilises the teller's narrative and opens it to processes of hermeneutic play, yet ethical questions that have been raised by this proposal have not been addressed. Playback theatre seems to transgress the boundaries of the personal and the public, of theatre and therapy. In our culture, the personal has been both *privatized*, and made the preserve of trained counsellors and therapists, and *sensationalised*, and so made the subject of confessional T.V. By dint of not fitting into established categories playback theatre can appear anomalous.

Mary Douglas (1966) in her acclaimed anthropological study of the categorisation of the sacred and the profane, stresses the dangers cultures attribute to that which falls outside established categories. Having been 'at sea' for so long now, it is time to address some of the ethical issues that have arisen in the course of this thesis - ones that have partially arisen from relinquishing the notion that performers enact the essence of the teller's story. It is also necessary to discuss some of the criticisms that have been made of the practice and consider the ethical and political questions that are raised by the title of this thesis: personal stories in public places.

Chapter Seven

Personal Stories in Public Places; the ethics and politics of playback theatre.

An experiment or a transgression?

An episode took place at the Sixth International Playback Theatre Conference in 1997 which illustrates some of the tensions within the playback community regarding the proper place of social and political analysis. It highlights significant ethical issues related to the position of the teller within playback theatre. The incident is of interest because it involves a variation from the usual structure of playback performances – a ‘transgression’ which caused some disagreement amongst the playback community.

The conference took place in Perth, Australia. Reflecting a growing concern within the playback community in the previous two years, the theme chosen was ‘cultural diversity’. Toward the end of that gathering a plenary playback theatre performance took place in which four experienced practitioners were asked to conduct one story each. There was an expectation that each conductor would demonstrate a different conducting style. It is likely that this set up a tension between the expectations of different tellers and the need to ‘demonstrate’ contrasting approaches to conducting; a tension that may partly explain the audience’s response. Francis Batten, a New Zealand-based playback trainer, psychodramatist and sociodramatist, had been asked to demonstrate his conducting style and he had decided beforehand that, if the story was suitable, he would adapt the conventional playback form to explore the social and political dynamics within the story. This decision

followed debates and discussions within the conference concerning the ability of playback theatre to go beyond the individual experience and enter into some sort of social analysis. According to his account, given to me during a telephone interview in September 2002, divisions had emerged within the conference between those who felt that playback should have a role in political 'consciousness raising' and those who argued that such a focus would be 'disrespectful to the teller'.

A Japanese playback practitioner came up to tell a story of an anorexic client of hers who had committed suicide. She told Batten that she carried an enormous sense of responsibility for the client's suicide. Later, in a letter written in the November 1997 issue of *Interplay*, she described the circumstances of her story. She is writing in English and this may explain her slightly unusual forms of expression.

Five years ago, an old friend (Mrs E) called to tell me that she had been suffering from a daughter who is anorexic. She seemed terribly stressed, for the town where the two of them lived still held very old-fashioned thinking and practices. The townspeople regarded this daughter's illness as a result of some bad omen. Therefore, the mother and daughter were unable to ask for any help in their town. Mrs E almost lost her sanity amidst this kind of discrimination from the other town members, and Mr and Mrs E's relationship also became tense as time progressed. The daughter, on the other hand, carefully planned out her scenario for her death, and terminated her life at 20. [...]

As the conference was proceeding with the large theme of ethnic prejudice and discrimination, I remembered Mrs E's words, of her wanting anorexia to vanish from this world. I did not know if bringing up this theme was appropriate with the flow of the conference, but I stood up as a teller despite fear and anxiety. (Shimamori 1997 p.9)

Batten began, observing the usual playback conventions, casting the teller's actor and the other main characters. He then broke that format by asking the audience to identify 'other players in society' (Batten 2002) who impacted upon this story. In this way 'the fashion industry', 'ideas of women's

beauty' and 'the media' were identified and cast within the audience. The enactment that followed involved, not only the actors on stage, but also those cast in the audience as various social forces deemed to be influential in the suicide of the teller's client. According to Batten this was a very successful piece of theatre, which '...rendered a moving story, sensitively and delicately.'

(2002)

However, his view of the work was not shared by a significant number of people in the audience. Although herself supportive of what Batten was attempting, Di Adderley, a British playback practitioner, described to me the 'resistance' in the audience to what Batten was doing and the 'anger and fury' that was present. These views were later expressed in the pages of *Interplay* and in a collection of essays about playback theatre (Fox and Dauber 1999). Fe Day, a New Zealand-based playback practitioner, writes of this episode as a 'breach of the contract made with the audience in a playback performance'.

I watched spellbound and deeply concerned as I observed the figure of the teller becoming more and more diminished by the complex canvas surrounding her. I observed a greater and greater engagement by the conductor in the fascinating internal structure of the story and a diminishing of the conductor's awareness of the teller. This represented to me a serious breach of the contract made with the audience in a playback performance, which is that the tellers will be cared for responsibly by both the conductor and by other audience members.

(1999 p.88-9)

The Dutch playback practitioner, Henk Hofmann, describes his anger at this piece of work and goes on to express his objection to an explicit focus on issues of cultural diversity. In doing so he makes clear his own perspective on the relationship between the personal and the political:

I disliked very much the large set-up and turning this story into a social and society event. I was very angry with the conductor, could not talk to him about this. [...] In my opinion the only way of getting as close as I can – without depressing feelings of guilt – to discrimination of a

culture, a people or a group is to get in touch with my own personal experiences of oppression or being oppressed. I am *not* saying that my feelings of loneliness as a young boy when schoolmates called me names *are the same* as the oppression of black people or Maori or Aboriginal people by white men. But it is through my *own* experiences of being kept down that I can understand a little. In the end Playback is about human beings. (1997 p.4)

Of course, one might ask why the teller or members of the audience did not actively object to Batten's work. Does the audience 'trance' or 'regression' claimed by Fox and others have such an effect that audience members find it difficult to actively resist? In fact, according to Batten, immediately after the event the teller approached him and thanked him for the piece of work. In Batten's words she said that:

Having the wider role system of implicated people and groups around her story had been helpful; particularly in helping her realise she was not alone and that there is a larger picture. (2002)

Later, however, she wrote the following in *Interplay*,

As the theatre started, what happened on stage was totally alien to what I understood to be playback theatre. As the conductor started asking the whole audience as to how they thought about anorexia, my strong emotions as a teller ceased, and I watched everything that went on stage as a total outsider, but from the teller's chair. This was my first experience of seeing sociodrama. (Shimamori 1997 p.9)

This incident and the strong responses to it raise significant questions about the nature of playback theatre. Firstly, it brings into question the position of the teller, his or her power and influence and the ethical questions that are raised when personal stories are told in public places. As I argued in *Chapter Four*, playback theatre differs markedly from other cognate disciplines such as psychodrama, the theatre of the oppressed and dramatherapy in the way in which it 'confines' the protagonist to the role of observer within the enactment. The teller is not encouraged to interrupt the

action or to give a lengthy response to it afterwards. This relative passivity of the person who supplies the 'text' of the enactment raises significant questions. Are tellers being 'manipulated' for the purposes of 'entertainment' (see page 288) as some critics of the form have argued? Are the boundaries between the personal and public so blurred in playback performances that it constitutes a psychologically unsafe environment?

The 'teller' feels vulnerable after telling during a rehearsal.

Through telling the story I am over-exposed. I over-stepped my own privacy. Revealing what, at that moment, was not safe to reveal, I opened a wound, perhaps to appease them, to please them or to be seen by them – and then I could find no way to close it. One of the other actors said to me 'People will only tell stories that they feel safe to tell'. Is this true? Is it not possible that tellers will find themselves stumbling into saying more than they wished to say, or more than they had expected?

What is more, if, as the objectors to Battens' experiment seem to suggest, there should be a primary concern for the individual experience in playback, why do performances take place in public, require minimal input from the teller and, as we have seen in previous chapters, be structured in such a way that the enactments multiply the perspectives brought to bear on the story? Is there a discordance between the espoused aims of being 'loyal to the teller's experience', on the one hand, and the very public and polyphonous nature of the form's dramaturgy, on the other? Or perhaps one needs to look

at this in another way and suggest that playback, in common with many other forms of theatre, serves as a site for the negotiation and exploration of ethical concerns concerning, amongst other things, the relationship between the personal and the public.

Batten's 'experiment' also raises another set of questions. As it is presently constituted, can playback theatre address the social and political forces that act upon individuals and communities? What is the capacity of the form to examine, deal with, or analyse, social and political forces that extend beyond the particularity of the individual narrative? Recent issues of *Interplay* (January and May, 2003) indicate that these seem to be increasingly potent issues amongst playback practitioners – issues, which, I would argue, have been stimulated by the rapid internationalisation of the practice. Salas writes:

Several years ago I began to feel restless with the exclusively personal focus of most playback theatre stories, especially in public performances. I felt sure that our personal stories were connected to much larger stories, including the huge tides of history. And I knew that I myself was often deeply affected by events that were not part of my own life. I wanted very much for our playback stage to widen - to become a place where we could collectively acknowledge these connections between the personal and the political. (2003 p.1)

Playback theatre does not attempt to develop strategies to counter oppression in the manner of the theatre of the oppressed. Nor does it usually explicitly dramatise the social and political forces acting upon the lives of individuals and communities. But neither does it attempt to resolve personal issues invoked by the teller, as would be the case, for example, in the psychodramatic or dramatherapy process. The form, therefore, finds itself in a difficult position, vulnerable to critique from two different standpoints – from those (usually therapists) who would criticise it for opening up personal issues

that cannot be resolved in a public arena, and from those who would argue that its concentration on the individual narrative may be a bourgeois indulgence which misses a political analysis. Indeed, could one argue that the relative passivity of the teller and the focus on individual narrative prevents the form from being one that can bring about social and political change?

Personal stories are always embedded in social and political contexts and yet the performers are arguably restricted in their portrayal of these contexts by the very need to 'respect' the teller. The response of the Perth audience seems to come from a sense that the boundary between the personal and the public/social had been transgressed. The incident may tell us a great deal, perhaps, about the assumptions being made in the playback community about the relationship between the 'personal' and the 'public'.

We might plausibly argue that Batten highlighted, perhaps inadvertently, the capacity of playback to not so much represent the social and political forces at work in an individual story as to dramatise the complex and contested relationships that exist between the personal and the public. The factors that produced the strong reaction to his work are always present, in one way or another, in playback performances, namely: what are, or what should be, the relationships between the personal experience and the public arena? Each time a teller steps forward to recount their own story they dramatise, in the decisions they make about what and how much to tell, that debate. Each time a spectator vicariously watches the telling and the enactment, questions are raised about what should and should not be told in public places. The telling of personal stories in public places seems to raise questions in the minds of the participants not only about the specific issues

that the stories evoke – the treatment of those with mental health problems or the ‘disappearances’ in Argentina, for example – but the telling also potentially invites a debate about speaking out or staying silent. And this question is always one that is shaped by political and cultural exigencies.

I will investigate the questions posed by Batten’s experiment. I will firstly look at the ‘conditions of exposure’ in playback performances and consider some of the criticisms that have been directed toward the form from those who maintain that it does not sufficiently protect the psychological safety of the teller. I will propose that playback does have certain ‘boundaries’ in place designed to protect the tellers and spectators, but I will also argue that it is the ambiguity and anomalies of the form that give it its character. As some of the critics suggest, there is a sense in which, in playback performances, something is happening in the ‘wrong place’ and it is that which makes the practice interesting and challenging. I will then explore what an ethics of playback might look like – an ethics which is able to take into account the polyphonous and imminent nature of the form and, crucially, one that recognises and acknowledges the ‘other’. The suggestions I make should not be regarded as the final word on the matter; they are by no means exhaustive. The ethical issues raised by playback are complex and my arguments are intended to open debate. They explore some of the implications of conceptualising playback as a process of hermeneutic play and so relinquishing the notion that performers capture the essence of the teller’s story.

1. Conditions of exposure: safety and danger in playback performances.

Relatively early in the history of Playback Theatre York (1994) the company received two letters from audience members who had attended a performance at North Tyneside Hospital to an audience of users of mental health services and local professionals. The two correspondents were psychotherapists. Their letters follow a similar theme, which may be summarised as a concern about the 'framing' of the playback event and the psychological safety of the participants. The first correspondent wrote the following:

My first concern was with members of the audience who, after sharing their inner stories, and having 'played back' or mirrored were left weeping and obviously in a disturbed state of mind. Whilst the re-enactment of their experiences could be seen in one sense as being deeply therapeutic if handled say, one-to-one, or in a small group; in another sense (and here, I feel is the rub) they were left to the vagaries of a large audience, who were applauding them and the plays for ...dare I utter the wordENTERTAINMENT!

One cannot avoid noting in passing the final conclusion to this section of the letter. The use of the phrase 'dare I utter the word...' and the capitalisation of 'entertainment' indicate to the reader that it is almost unthinkable to consider the sharing and enactment of 'inner stories' in a public setting as entertainment. It is clear that the writer believes that something is happening in the wrong place. The second correspondent picks up this sense of the inappropriateness of the telling and enacting of personal stories in public places:

I am struggling to find a word for what happened on Saturday evening. The word 'performance' keeps springing to mind but as fast as it comes I know it is not appropriate. Yet likewise, although it is designated as therapeutic, I did not see therapeutic boundaries in place.

Another criticism some years later picks up on this theme. Elinor Vettriano (1999), having attended the International Playback Theatre Conference, writes, 'I found myself questioning the safe nature and validity of this form of theatre'. She goes on to wonder whether there is the 'safe container' of dramatherapy present in the playback theatre practice and asks important questions about the form. In the same article Maggie Morgan asks the same questions writing:

In certain 'contained' contexts, Playback could have a most effective role. Questions need to be asked, however, about boundaries and even accountability. It is an artistic form worth much more than being an up-market Oprah Winfrey show. (Vettriano 1999 p.9)

It is clear that these correspondents felt that they had attended an event that did not possess the 'boundaries' they believed to be important when personal stories are told. More than that they felt that the performers were, perhaps salaciously, making use of this confusion of categories; that the tellers, at best, were not fully informed about the nature of the event and, at worse, manipulated into providing personal stories for 'entertainment'. These are very serious criticisms of the form and they reveal what, I think, is a central characteristic of playback theatre – the difficulty of positioning it clearly within established categories. The tension I discussed in *Chapter Six*, between the need to tell personal stories and the requirement to produce 'good theatre', is apparent here in the response of these critics. Playback does seem to raise and dramatise the disputed relationships between the personal/private and the public. As I shall propose, the ambiguities raised by the form may be one of its most interesting features.

Boundaries.

As I proposed in *Chapter One*, the different places in which playback theatre performances take place produce different constructions of public and personal and so different levels of personal disclosure on the part of the audience and the performers. The way in which notions of public and personal are constructed, negotiated, and maintained produce the 'boundaries' to which the second correspondent refers.

In dramatherapy, psychodrama, psychotherapy and counselling, boundaries mark out a space. They are considered to provide defence and protection for those inside, defining what lies within and what is excluded (Clarkson 1995 p.48). In these disciplines the notion of the boundary seems to be employed both literally and metaphorically. Literally, it denotes the physical space within which the consultation occurs. Don Feasey, for example, stresses that attending to the place where the therapy occurs helps to create a therapeutic relationship. He writes 'It is the secret and confidential world in which the therapist and the client can come together' (2000 p.13). Boundaries are also used metaphorically to suggest the delineation of a period within which certain relationships and levels of exposure are possible. It is common for therapists to have very clearly defined sessions – the fifty-minute hour, for example.

Boundaries are also employed to establish the relationship between therapist and client. They are maintained in order to suggest the level of possible personal intimacy, to mark the limits of any personal disclosure by the therapist, and to control communication outside the sessions. A practice in which personal exposure is desirable and in which complex transference

relationships take place, requires robust attention to its boundaries. The process of transference, for example, involves the loosening of the boundaries between self and other as the client (or therapist) symbolically recreates in the therapist (or client) qualities that are repressed or that belong to a significant other (Brooks 1994; Clarkson 1995). It is a process which involves a certain 'slippage' of identity. Clarkson defines it thus:

The transference/countertransference relationship is the experience of unconscious wishes and fears transferred on to or into the therapeutic partnership. (1995 p.62)

It is axiomatic of psychotherapeutic practice that, in order for that 'slippage' of identities across the 'therapeutic partnership' to take place, it is necessary to create and maintain well-defined outer 'frames' (Langs 1976; Clarkson 1995). Playback Theatre York's critics see, in terms of what the teller is being asked to do, similar processes to the therapeutic encounter. The teller is encouraged to reveal personal experience within a space that is unprotected by the usual therapeutic protocols, within relationships that have not been clearly defined, and witness an enactment in which it is likely that processes of identification and transference will occur. It is not surprising that some find this disturbing.

There are a number of responses that could be made to these criticisms directed at playback practice. Before I rehearse them, however, it is important to note that my own response to this is necessarily a complex one and is, inevitably, conditioned by my experience as a playback performer facing such criticism. I will myself need to tread a careful boundary between being an apologist for playback practice, on the one hand, and taking a more dispassionate view, on the other.

The Apologist:

These criticisms arrived just as I joined the company and they disturbed me at the time. The company has often discussed the themes they raise informally. I have often relished the challenge playback poses to 'therapy'. I wrote the following in December 1998:

Returning the tears to the community.

In the evening following our performance in Helmsley, a discussion developed concerning the last story that was told in which a man had come on to the stage unsure of what his story was, but knowing that he had been moved by the previous one. The story he eventually told was about the death of his mother, the loss of his father in early childhood, and communication with his dead mother at a séance. As he told this story he cried and his wife came onstage to sit by him and comfort him. One of the company was concerned about the ethics of allowing the vulnerability of this man to be so publicly revealed. This was, in the view of this member of our company, a 'therapy without boundaries', without the protection and continuity of the ongoing therapeutic relationship. This is a recurring theme in our company life: it concerns the ethics and responsibility of the company in a playback performance. During the course of the discussion I said that I thought therapists had monopolised and mystified the emotional world, giving the impression that only they could deal with the hurt and pain of emotional trauma. I said that that playback theatre was part of a movement of 'returning the tears to the community'.

First Response: There are 'boundaries' in playback practice.

In her introduction to dramatherapy Sue Jennings writes of the 'distancing mechanisms' of theatre, which 'paradoxically... serve to bring us closer to ourselves' (1998 p.36). For her, and for many theorists in dramatherapy, (Landy 1993; Jones 1996) theatrical conventions which clearly define the fictional and dramatic from the everyday, such as clearly defined stage areas or the use of costume, provide psychic distance from the events onstage at the same time as paradoxically allowing intense identification with it. This theory has proved important in countering the arguments of those concerned with the danger of introducing drama to vulnerable client groups and has proved useful in shaping therapeutic decisions concerning the level of engagement. Phil Jones (1996 p.104), for example, shows how, according to the client's needs, the therapist can devise dramatic structures in order to promote close empathic identification with the material or allow distance and perspective upon it. In dramatherapy the 'dramatic paradox' (Landy 1993 p.15) – we come closer to ourselves through the distance that theatre provides – has proved a key concept in establishing and understanding the therapeutic possibilities of drama.

Daphna Ben Chaim expresses that paradox as a 'double edged psychic tension'. She argues that because:

...we know that the work is fictional, we do not literally believe in the events onstage; but our willingness to imagine with the theatrical representation commits us to a metaphorical mode of thinking, a 'seeing as'; the tacit awareness of this fiction and the conditional (and withdrawable) belief in the image provide the *psychological protection* that permits an intense projection of emotions, reinforcing our stimulated belief in the image. (1984 p.75) [My emphasis]

Having already rendered the notion of 'fictional' and the 'real' problematic, I will use it here with caution. In playback theatre performances the boundary between the 'fictional' and the 'real' is a complex one. The 'owner' of the narrative being dramatised is present and is watching. Her identity, inevitably exposed and implicated in her narratives, is to some extent being played out in front of her. The levels of identification are intense: she has chosen the actor to play herself and now she is watching that actor. The distinction between the fictional and real may be closer to collapsing than is the case in theatrical productions in which the characters and narratives on stage are not so closely related to the autobiography of the spectator. Yet the distinction remains through the theatrical conventions of the form and, perhaps, because the teller/spectator makes a choice to maintain it.

The distinction between the real and the fictional are visibly drawn upon the stage by the positioning of the teller in relation to the enactment. The clear 'rules' that exist concerning the relationship between the actors and the teller, for example, are designed to permit the performers freedom to 'explore the occasion'. Despite the observation that the language of 'frames' is problematic since it implies a conception that is not flexible enough to convey the excess of performance, Schechner's 'axiom of frames' is important here. Nevertheless, playback theatre practitioners often do seem to attend carefully to boundaries. There is, in the practice of Playback Theatre York for example, an, at times obsessional, attention to 'edges' or to the 'margins'. The company will spend considerable time in pre-performance rehearsals working out the precise order of the opening sequence or they will rehearse and re-rehearse the conventions used at the beginning of each enactment. Members of the

company will enjoin others to turn to the teller at the conclusion of each dramatisation or remind each other to stay still until the teller has finished speaking and only then 'tidy up' the stage. Of course, this may be due to a certain performance anxiety; after all in improvisation there is little one can control except these conventions. However, its purpose is almost certainly also related to a recognition of the importance of attending to the edges that create boundaries between the 'real' and the 'fictional'. It may be that the psychotherapeutic attention to the boundaries of place, time and relationship are, to some extent, built into the theatrical conventions of playback practice.

My argument so far has neglected, as do those of playback's critics, the teller/spectator's act of choice. She is *choosing* to tell her story and see herself and her life on stage. She is making choices about her levels of identification and absorption. For example, the fact that the actions on stage derive from her own life prevents close identification, since her 'willingness to imagine' may be inhibited by the teller making comparisons between her experience and the representation on stage. The teller is as likely as not to be making sensible choices concerning her psychological well being as a teller. It is not just the performers who are 'manipulating distance' but in an act of 'self-protection' it is likely that the teller is also exercising her choice. This is certainly an implication of Sartre's insistence that the willingness to believe what is taking place on the stage is a *voluntary* act of consciousness (Ben Chaim 1984 p.23). Ben Chaim summarises this:

The basis for distance is that we choose to act mentally toward an acknowledged unreality in some crucial ways as if it were reality. That we are free not to do so but that we choose to do so implicates us in its creation; it is a voluntary commitment to participate in the creation of an alternative universe. (p.74-74)

The psychotherapist's critique of playback ignores the freedom of the teller to tell and then, having told, choose whether to believe in what happens on the stage or not. To put this another way: the teller is free to play. In *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott writes:

Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. (1989 p.38)

For him the conversation in psychoanalysis is analogous to that of play. As Adam Phillips explains: 'It is in the overlap, the transitional space between analyst and patient, that communication takes place'. (Phillips 1988 p.142) It is a space somewhat reminiscent of Turner's liminal space, 'betwixt and between'. Playback invites the teller, as well as the performers, to play with the meanings in the story.

In a similar fashion to Winnicott's play of psychoanalysis, playing stops when the interpretations become too dogmatic. Hermeneutic play, as Phillips says of the transitional space, is 'always vulnerable to pre-emptive intrusion' (p.146). In the following example, the boundaries between the 'real' and the fictional' are transgressed and play stops.

The 'teller'

During rehearsal I told a story about my anxiety when visiting a friend who had just had a major operation for cancer. I was worried that I would not treat him 'normally' and would say something stupid or patronising or over-optimistic to cover my own anxiety. The enactment was disturbing and not as I had expected. It seemed to me that the actors played me as being rather self-obsessed. My anxieties came across as self-indulgent:

who was I to be worrying at such unimportant things when my friend was suffering? I felt angry and attacked. I was no longer willing to join in the play of meanings of my story.

The form does not build into its structure an opportunity for the teller to stop the action as, for example, is the case in psychodrama, the Theatre of the Oppressed, or through the use of the 'buzzer' and bell in *Lifegame* (see page 26) NB . In my experience of playback I have not known an occasion in which the teller had stopped the enactment. This is a key difference between playback and other cognate disciplines. I have argued that the non-involvement of the teller in the dramatic action may have the effect of producing compound reflexivity and may draw attention to the means of representing autobiographical experience. However, the lack of a means by which the teller could halt the action suggests powerlessness on her part that raises ethical concerns. Although the teller is asked after the enactment to comment, the pressures exerted by the presence of performers and audience within the context of a performance make it difficult to do so. In playback the performers are given considerable freedom; it is always possible that this may be abused.

Second Response: The blurring of boundaries is a key characteristic of playback theatre.

Mary Douglas (1966), in her anthropological study of the categorisation of the sacred and the profane, stresses the dangers cultures attribute to that which falls outside established categories. Perhaps the 'danger' for one of the

correspondents writing to Playback Theatre York lay in her inability to categorise the event she was attending. She was unable to make up her mind if it was a 'performance' or a 'therapeutic' occasion of some kind. Playback theatre is haunted by this confusion. The fact that autobiographical experiences are called for and that the actors in their opening often tell personally revealing stories, together with the fact that a dialogue takes place between conductor and teller, suggests a therapeutic event of some kind. Yet the event is billed as 'theatre', actors perform, audiences applaud and laugh and the relationship between auditorium and stage suggests a relatively conventional theatre event. Playback theatre is, as Bill Nichols might put it, a 'deliberate border violation', which serves '...to announce a contestation of forms and purposes' (1994 p.x). Violation is a strong word and I would prefer to use the phrase 'border transgression'. What is being contested or transgressed here? It is, among other things the relationship between the personal/private and the public. Playback invites and dramatises this transgression.

The *sine qua non* of therapy is privacy. The client rightly expects that the consultation will be confidential and the therapist is bound to accept the ethical principles concerning the privacy of the patient (Rowson 2001). By inviting personal stories to be told in public places, however, playback queries assumptions about the conditions necessary for the beneficial disclosure of autobiographical material. As 'apologists' for the form, Steve Nash and I wrote the following in response to the criticism that playback was an 'up-market Oprah Winfrey show':

It is our contention that Playback Theatre challenges the 'privatisation of the personal' - a characteristic of modern western European culture.

Ours is a culture in which stories of personal distress have been increasingly colonised by the expert, the counsellor and the therapist. The experience of distress is thus not only segregated from the everyday, but it is also separated from the collective by the overwhelming emphasis on the necessity for individual personal growth. Together with the privatisation of the railways has arrived the privatisation of personal pain and distress. (2000/2001 p. 17)

The 'apologist' for playback may go on to argue that the desire to expose more of the personal and autobiographical through such programmes as, for example, *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Big Brother* does not contradict the argument but rather reinforces it. As Laura Mulvey (1975) writes scopophilia – the pleasure that derives from looking – turns the other into an object for sexual gratification. The desire to expose and be exposed in contemporary culture may be a sign of repression, a sign that 'real' contact is denied. Nash and Rowe continue:

...are these [reality TV programmes] not the signs of the very privatisation that we are suggesting? Are they not the visible signs of repression? The personal has become pornographic precisely because it has gone underground. Are we not titillated by TV's seedy revelations because we no longer have the real thing? The sentimental and the voyeuristic are replacing emotion and intimacy and in their place we have an ersatz experience. (p. 17)

The authors beg the question of what is meant by 'the real thing'. There is a suggestion implied in their discourse, and visible in other playback apologetics, that playback practice will permit a return to the 'real', the authentic or the original. Their argument for the return of the 'real thing' is rendered problematic – perhaps fatally – by Baudrillard's argument that simulacra have banished, and indeed precede, the 'real'. As Baudrillard puts it:

The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth it is the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – it is the map that engenders the territory. (1983 p.2)

Despite the problems of arguing that playback might offer a return to the real, the practice does raise questions about the proper place of the personal within the public domain and so poses, albeit implicitly, a challenge to therapy. The practice is a 'border transgression' and as such it presents a challenge to the individualised, privatised and, therefore, perhaps, to the denial of politics often found in therapy.

Playback is not alone in doing so. What is loosely called the 'anti-psychiatry movement' also challenges the privatisation – and therefore the apparent apolitical nature – of therapy (Masson 1990; Spinelli 1994; Tottin 2000). Critics have noted the sequestration of personal distress by the therapy services, the mystification of the means of offering help and, in Masson's (1990) view, its conspiratorial professionalisation. The sternest critics of therapy have aimed their fire at its inability to engage with issues of social justice. Jeffrey Masson, for example:

Every therapy I have examined ...displays a lack of interest in social injustice.... Each shows an implicit acceptance of the status quo. In brief, almost every therapy shows a certain lack of interest in the world. (1990 p.283)

I would propose that the transgression of boundaries is a key characteristic of playback theatre. By unsettling certain conventions concerning the telling of autobiographical material in public places, it poses a challenge to therapeutic orthodoxies.

Third response: There is a 'moral' imperative to tell in public.

It is 1971, and Mirek says that the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. (Kundera 1982 p.3)

In January 2000, Playback Theatre York performed at the Dundee Repertory Theatre to a group of users and professionals of mental health services. During that event a man told a story of his first admission to an acute ward. On his first evening he watched the charge nurse punch another young man in the chest and force him to take medication. He described his fear and concluded by saying 'I have never really been able to trust a mental health professional since that night'.

After the enactment the conductor invited comments from the audience. The teller's community psychiatric nurse raised her hand and talked about her reaction to his story. She said she felt very 'angry and ashamed' about what had happened to him. She went on to describe her feelings as she watched him tell. She wondered if she should have 'brought' him to the performance and worried that it might make him upset and 'ill'. She then recognised that he could make a decision about whether he attended or not. She concluded by saying that she was pleased she had heard his story. From his seat in the audience, the teller reassured her that he felt O.K. This was followed by a professional in adolescent psychiatry coming onstage to describe her feelings of 'inadequacy' when working with young people with acute mental health problems.

Richard Kearney writes that '...the horror of moral evil must be retrieved from oblivion by means of narrative remembering' (2002 p.48). He goes on to explore the 'delicate balance' that needs to be struck between the need to tell and the recognition that the trauma is unspeakable. My third response makes the claim for an ethics of playback rooted in the need for what Kearney calls the 'little narratives of the vanquished' (p.61). Kearney

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goes on to oppose these to what he calls the 'Grand Narratives' of the victor. This binary is problematic; since it places both the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressor' in seemingly immutable positions in relation to each other, and, therefore, masks the nuances and subtleties of their circumstances (the 'victors' may also have 'little narratives' to tell). Bearing this caveat in mind, however, I would argue that playback can, and sometimes does, provide a forum for those who have been silent. As Fox writes,

...I believe that the forces for whitewashing history are very strong – often the rich and powerful write it to their advantage – and that therefore it is necessary to make a place for the 'unofficial history' of those who suffer or are not heard. ...I believe playback theatre, by showing the secrets boldly, may be able to redeem 'history'. (1999 p.196)

Fox's use of the term 'boldly' here suggests a personal risk on the part of the performers; it is difficult to see in what sense this is the case. Nevertheless, although not exclusively, playback theatre has been performed to audiences whose stories comprise 'unofficial history' – children who suffered in the political violence in Fiji; lesbian, gay and transgender people in the United States; the relatives and friends of 'the disappeared ones' in Argentina; stories from Germany's Nazi past; refugees in France; playback in prisons and with users of mental health services in Britain.

The following account by Maria Elena Garavelli in *Interplay* in 2001, describes a performance that took place in La Plata, Argentina, in March 2000. Her playback theatre company, 'El Pasaje', were invited to perform at the first 'Conference on the Construction of Collective Memory'. The event was organised to acknowledge and record the experiences of the relatives of those who had 'disappeared' during the Argentinean dictatorship. The

disturbing stories told at that performance convey the terror of the dictatorship and the inability and unwillingness of many to forget. I give one story in full, by way of example.

I was a prisoner in Sierra Chica.

It was April '77. My cellmate was from Cordoba, like you. Given the terrible situation we weren't badly off. We played cards with ordinary paper which I'd drawn on. We threw them away at night and the next day I drew them again. We told jokes and tried to survive.

One night, in the middle of the silence, we heard the cries of a fellow prisoner who was having an attack of claustrophobia. He yelled and yelled and we knew what that would mean. Then we heard the guards arrive - there were noises and screams like we'd heard recently. They beat him to death. We heard it all from our cell. My friend told me that eight months before they had killed his brother, but he hadn't been able to cry. That night we held each other, and cried together. (Garavelli 2001 p.3)

Garavelli goes on to write about the 'collective amnesia' that accompanied the period of Argentinean dictatorship and the potential of playback theatre to aid in the process of 'the collective construction of memory':

The silence and amnesia which veil the years of repression and the military dictatorship ... create black holes produced by state terrorism among communities, and leave us alone and isolated - rendering us impotent against the unbridled power of those who thrive through the complicity of our scepticism, or our failure to take part in acts of solidarity.

The Playback Theatre Company offers a space to patch up around these holes, to restore a fabric ravaged by hate, corruption, abuse and the merciless struggle for power. An empty stage to be filled with stories that people are ready to tell about their experiences, and which need to be passed on to the community - a space where trust allows these stories to be told; stories that bear witness to other truths about what is happening. A space to build this alternative reality, to register opposing accounts, to look for the truth in other versions and voices... to make the truth apparent through the accounts of witnesses. (Garavelli 2001p.3)

Daniel Feldhendler, in the same issue of *Interplay* (perhaps significantly the first to appear after the September 11 attacks), picks up the notion of the role of playback theatre in the 'collective construction of memory' in relation to the experience of the German people. He summarizes it as the 'culture of remembrance'.

Playback Theatre is an instrument of the culture of remembrance, where the personal stories of many people may come together, and where they can be connected to the wider history. (2001 p.8)

There are many accounts in the playback theatre literature of stories of personal and political oppression told in performances and it is clear that the telling and witnessing of such stories is considered by its practitioners to be one of the key reasons for the work. Sometimes, however, members of the audience do not welcome these stories. Peni Moore (2002) has recently written about playback theatre with children in Fiji who suffered in the recent coup d'etat. She recounts one story of a young Muslim girl made to watch as the women in her family were forced by 'the rebels' to strip and cook their food. Later during a performance interval one of the teachers came up to Moore and angrily asked why the company '...brought up these sort of stories when we are all just trying to forget and carry on with our lives'. Moore replied that it was important that the story had been told and had been '...accepted so that she would be able to get on with her life'. She went on to observe that this 'attitude of hiding the truth and talk of forgetting' is very common amongst 'male members of the oppressed community'. (Moore 2002 p.8)

Heather Robb (1995), a New Zealander practising playback in France, described a similar episode in which attempts were made to 'silence' the voices of children in a performance held within a UNESCO event entitled Personal stories in public places: an investigation of playback theatre. Nick Rowe. March 2005

Charter for Children's Rights. Her company had worked with a group of 30 to 40 children to prepare them to tell their stories at a forthcoming performance. The children had told many stories of physical abuse. When it came to the main event at which in the audience, together with the children, there were '...municipal officials and other official people who had been invited to speak on a panel after the performance', the children continued to tell their stories of abuse. As the conductor, Heather Robb, wrote 'I couldn't get them off the subject':

I now get to the point where something totally unexpected happened: some adults suddenly interrupted to say how 'shocked' they were to see what they considered to be an abuse of these children's rights to intimacy. And the 'shocked' adults turned out to be those invited on the panel to talk about children's rights. (Robb 1995 p.1)

Robb continues by questioning the way that she handled the performance and noted 'the tremendous political implications that playback can have' and that she enjoyed the 'role of a political stirrer up and provocateur'. Fox comments, in response, that this incident illustrates how playback 'has the capacity to broker between worlds' and that, for him, the 'ultimate purpose of playback' is to promote a 'radical social encounter' (1995 p.4).

The dialogue between the mental health user and the nurse in Dundee might be seen as a 'radical social encounter'. It provided a forum for a dialogue that exposed the operation of power in psychiatry and enabled people with very different experiences of those power relations to speak to each other. However, this kind of opportunity is certainly not unique to playback theatre, there are other forums – for example Survivors Speak Out or the Prevention of Professional Abuse Network (Maria 2003) – that afford a 'radical social encounter' in the field of mental health. The claim that playback

can make ‘the truth apparent through the accounts of witnesses’, as Garavelli claims, needs to be nuanced by an awareness that these witness accounts are ‘filtered’ through the response of the performers – a response that may acknowledge and validate their stories but may also ‘betray’ them. Ethical concerns are always apparent in the response of performers to the teller’s narrative.

Towards an ethics of playback theatre: responding to the ‘other’.

‘I have always taken the tips of my fingers
for the beginning of her hair’

(Jarbés in Hughes and Brecht 1978)

How can one formulate an ethics of playback? My responses to Playback Theatre York’s critics do not provide an answer to that question. It merely argues for a re-evaluation of the possibilities of telling personal stories in public places. What would an ethics of playback look like? How can one speak of ethics without recourse to such conceptions as the ‘unified self’ or the ‘authentic performer’? An ethics of playback needs to exceed the mere statement of principles. It needs to be responsive to the relational and multi-perspectival characteristics of the form. It needs to take into account of the presence of hermeneutic play and the primacy of the signifier in playback dramatisations. An ethics of playback needs to accommodate the tension between the performative and the referential which, I have argued, is a key characteristic of the form.

Crucially, a practice in which performers spontaneously *respond* to the other requires an ethics that is capable of the recognition of alterity. Fox recognises that performers and conductors require a 'sensitivity to difference' (1999 p.3) as a necessity for 'deep stories' to be told. My uneasiness with such staples of playback discourse as 'essence', ritual and authenticity lie in their denial of difference. My concern with the danger of erasing difference through the processes of identification and caricature has been alluded to in previous chapters. The risk of improvisation is that, under the pressure to 'produce' something, the performer may rely on stereotype and unconsidered assumption. The particularity of individual experience may be erased by the partiality (in both senses of the word) of the performers' response.

In searching for a contemporary ethics and politics of playback beyond 'the illusion of a universally binding ethic', Jutta Heppekausen writes:

Playback Theatre is one of those practices that enable the complex possibility of real contact, real meeting to take place between people. In this, it represents a form of moral learning. The post-modern social situation is characterised by plurality, segmentation and differentiations that lead, at the same time, to both insecurity and new opportunities for contact. The concept of 'morality' has been released from the illusion of a universally binding ethic (the Enlightenment, Kant etc), which also served to avoid real personal closeness through standardised social codes of interaction. Today, we no longer find a state-controlled ethical monopoly; a variety of ethical systems have been left to the mercy of market forces. (2003 p.3)

She finds an ethics of playback in the acceptance of difference; the 'opening of a dialogue' through the recognition of the 'other'; and the acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty. Her approach to playback eschews organised or codified deontological formulations of ethical positions, instead preferring to stress the ethics that are called for in relationships with others. She would perhaps support the words of John Caputo:

On their best day principles are the faded copies of the singularity of concrete situations...Principles fall before the demands of concretely situated responsibility, giving way to the insight, the acumen, the nimble skill, the adroit light-footedness, and the heartfelt love that holds sway in the multiple settings of ethical life, settings so diverse and unpredictable, too polymorphic and unprecedented, to be gathered up and codified.(2003 p.179)

For Richard Kearney the question of ethics concerns the face-to-face 'disposition' toward the other. Ethics concerns how we are 'disposed' to the other, not a 'position' which is closed and non-relational.

It is clear that this notion of the ethical subject as a dis-position before the face of the other is radically social and political in its implications. (in Read 1993 p.91)

An ethics of playback that is developed out of being 'before the face of the other' may best be found in the body. It is the body that stands before the other. It is, I would argue, in the vulnerability and exposure of the body that a relational 'apricipled' ethics lies. As Eagleton maintains: 'It is the mortal, fragile, suffering, ecstatic, needy, dependent, desirous, compassionate body which furnishes the basis of all moral thought' (Eagleton 2003 p.155). I am not suggesting here that the body provides a final and authoritative source for an ethics of playback. It would be wise not to fall back into the trap of recreating an 'essential' body. However, the material, mortal body may be a useful trope to construct such an ethics.

I have argued that playback does not proceed from the narrative of an autonomous, unified self. Playback performers do not replicate any such narrative, rather they respond to it through multiple subject positions. No one perspective is usually dominant in that response. This absence of a controlling cognitive presence destabilises the teller's narrative and opens up the possibility of hermeneutic play. But it may also allow recognition of otherness.

Edith Wyschogrod asks: 'What, after all, ... is wrong with images of unified egos and cognitive subjects?' She goes on to answer her question in the following way: 'Each in a different way reduces what is specifically other about other persons' (2003 p.62). A unified self cannot register alterity '...without converting it into the content of one's own cognitive and conative acts' (p.62). The ego pulls the 'other' into its orbit of consciousness.

Extending on the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, Wyschogrod suggests that it is in the pain and vulnerability of the body that a fuller recognition of alterity lies. In the West, she argues, vision has been the primary sense, governing the way in which the body is interpreted. Vision tends to view the body, and the world, as wholes or *gestalts*, encouraging a cognitive, organising and controlling 'view' of the body. Vision in that sense serves the unified ego. The search for a postmodern ethics cannot lie here. Wyschogrod singles out touch as '...the much neglected ground for understanding the body of ethics' (p.58). The tactile sense is bound up with '...desire, pleasure and pain, rather than with cognition'. What is more, touch 'disperses the ego' throughout all the surfaces of the body. Sensations are experienced everywhere along the surfaces of the body, and so the limits and extent of the ego, are 'experienced in disseminated *local* sensations' (p.60). Tactility disperses the ego and, '...enables us to distinguish alterity, to orient ourselves in space, to know the body as disseminated sensation and as a unified self ...' (p.60-61).

Awareness of the other and the susceptibility of our own body acts as a 'brake' to action and '...a kind of restraining order against violence' (p.63). This is a conception of ethics that goes beyond principle and codes of moral

action. However, this is merely a passive property of the 'ethical body' and Wyschogrod also suggests an active one:

The vulnerability of the other evokes one's own capacity for experiencing pain, for emptying oneself of egoistic orientation, so that one's corporeality may be at the service of the other. What is more, the capacity for pain engenders the realization that what can ultimately be given is the gift of the totality of self, of one's own corporeality. (p.63)

A note of caution needs to be sounded, however: the notion of a 'gift' of 'one's own corporeality' could easily suggest a principle of unreflexive giving which denies the ambiguities and potential power relations inherent in all acts of generosity. I am uneasy with the notion, sometimes promulgated in playback discourse, that the performers' work is a 'gift' to the teller.

Terry Eagleton also argues for what he calls a 'materialist morality' located in the 'moral body' (2003 p.157). Taking Lear as his example, he writes:

In the course of the drama, Lear will learn that it is preferable to be a modestly determinate 'something' that a vacuously global 'all'.... [This is because] he is forced up against the brute recalcitrance of Nature, which reminds him pitilessly of what all absolute power is likely to forget, namely that he has a body. Nature terrorizes him into finally embracing his own finitude. (2003 p.182)

Relinquishing the 'fantasy of disembodiment', Lear finally comes to recognise that when his subjects told him, 'I was everything; 'tis a lie – I am not ague-proof' (Act 4 Scene 6). Eagleton goes on to argue that, not only does the recognition of mortality allow us 'fellow-feeling'; it also acts as a brake to power. Wonderfully pithily he writes: 'If power had a body, it would be forced to abdicate'. (2003 p.183)

In the previous chapter I proposed that the evanescence of improvisation reminds us of our transience. Improvisers can build no

monuments against death; their work fades quickly into forgetfulness. For me this is a painful business, but the logic of my argument suggests that it may be that the fact of playback's ephemerality acts as a safeguard against the fantasies of omnipotence.

The notion of the mortal and moral body provides a valuable trope for conceptualising an ethics of playback. It escapes the problems of adopting principles that cannot flexibly respond to 'the demands of concretely situated' responsibilities. It permits a concept of ethics beyond the unified moral subject and it allows the possibility of an empathy found in the body. It bears resemblance to Buber's 'I and Thou' relations referred to by both Fox (Fox 1994) and Dauber (1999) as being influential in the development of playback.

The 'performer'

In rehearsal a teller recounts feelings of foolishness after making a serious financial mistake. The conductor calls for a 'free impro'.

We walk forward. My body is shrinking and collapsing. I am twisting, becoming misshapen, ugly, tense and tight. A weight on my back is pushing me down. I feel my face registering the pain and the weight. I shout 'I am shamed'.

In playback, when the performers respond to the other's narrative through, with, and from the body, they are more likely to register alterity and accept ambivalence. However, when the performer feels the need to control what is happening, because he is too scared or too 'sure', then performances that are

'unethical' are possible. The following was recorded after a rehearsal of Playback Theatre York in March 2003.

The 'reflecting actor'

At rehearsal I was feeling vulnerable and exposed, I was not happy with my acting. I felt that everyone else was thinking that about me too. I was planning what I was going to do before I came forward. I was not listening to the teller's story. On this occasion, stepping forward as the first actor in a fluid sculpt, I did something which only conveyed the most negative part of the teller's experience – her sense of being confined at home – whereas the story had actually been about her transcending those feelings. Perhaps I only heard that part of her story that applied to me at that moment. Maybe I was telling her story but it was heavily 'contaminated' by my own.

An ethical disposition to the 'other' in playback performances is illustrated by Susan Evans and William Layman who staged a playback performance for the families and friends of fire-fighters following a forest fire in Washington State in July 2001. Four fire fighters had died in the fire. They compiled a list of 'lessons' that they gleaned from the performance:

- Allow for the possibility that not everyone will be helped – some may experience shock watching the playbacks.
- Recognise and prepare for the unintended risk of inducing re-traumatisation.

- The audience won't necessarily feel happy about what you gave them – in fact they may be upset and angry with you for arousing certain issues that are uncomfortable and distressing to address.
- Don't re-create gruesome moments literally - i.e. dying screams of victims.
- Keep the pacing slow, listen to your musician and be ready for music to carry the story forward. (Evans and Layman 2001 p.7)

Such awareness of the effects of strong affective expression and free improvisation upon the teller and audience indicates the importance of an appreciation of the impact of the intensity of a playback performance on the audience; these 'lessons' point to the limits of identification in playback acting raised in *Chapter Four*. As I argued there, the performer's intense identification may erase the teller's identity and engulf the subtleties of his experience. The performers' work needs to be inflected by awareness of the audience sensibilities and of their irreducible 'otherness'.

As one spectator told us during the performance in Halifax in December 1999:

'Your strong expression of emotion was frightening. It made us feel we were in a David Lynch film.'

In *Experience from the Deep End* the actor is aware of the impact a dramatic decision may have on the teller.

The 'performer'

I had another idea as I stood listening to the story. Before the performance began, I had been talking to the others about the proscenium

stage that was behind our set. I had joked about finding a way to use it in the performance. As T. told his story, I wondered about using the stage as the place to denote his 'over-reaching' of himself. The mixture of his separation from others and his described 'narcissistic' desire would be interesting portrayed on this stage. I decided against the use of the proscenium stage. Perhaps it was far too chilling an image of his breakdown. I spoke to Susanna about this after the performance and she said 'Yes, you could have hidden from us behind the curtains and got lost in the curtain's folds'.

Another way to frame an understanding of the ethical response to difference is to argue that playback performers need to be responsive to the nature of the public place in which they perform. The importance of a sensitivity to 'place' is evident in the work with Washington State fire-fighters: the particular timing of their performance (soon after the fire) and their awareness of how the aesthetics of the performance would affect the audience seem to be crucial factors in shaping their work. In general, the performers' work may need to be very different in the intimate environment of say, the G.P. performances, than in the large conference hall or in a mental health setting. Performers may need to be particularly alert to the particular properties of the space since, as I argued in *Chapter One*, the social, cultural and geographical configuration of space is crucial in determining the extent of personal disclosure considered possible or appropriate by spectators.

Playback's response to difference.

These questions of the ethical response to the 'other' are not just confined to the individual performer; they also apply to the wider cultural playback movement. The response of an organisation to the challenges of alterity is an indication of its political and ideological credentials. Playback has been challenged by its own growth beyond the largely white, western communities from which it began. Such growth has led the movement to question its membership, its aesthetics and, as the Batten 'experiment' demonstrates, has shaken any settled notions the movement might have had concerning its understanding of the relationship between the personal story and the culture in which it is embedded.

In June 1993 the International Playback Theatre Conference took place in Finland. Entitled the *Midnight Sun Conference*, this event may be seen in retrospect as a watershed in the development of playback as an international form and, therefore, as a movement that would henceforth be challenged by the widening cultural diversity of its practitioners. People from 19 countries attended that Conference and, following the event, Bev Hosking, the then president of the International Playback Theatre Network (IPTN) wrote in

Interplay:

..for the first time I got a glimpse of what it might mean to be a truly international organisation – the satisfaction of this and also the challenges. (1993 p.2)

In the same issue Mary Good wrote that,

At this Conference the pull was for union at, I think, the expense of the recognition of the differences between us, differences in experience, culture, talents and strengths. (1993 p.1)

In many respects Good's comment was remarkably prescient. The tension between the pull toward unity and the recognition of difference is one that remains an active one. This is not surprising, considering the spread of playback practice throughout the world, which picked up pace through the 1990s. The tension manifests itself in the wish of the Board of the IPTN to respect difference on the one hand, and their anxiety to control what they call 'rogue playback' (Hosking, Fox et al. 1999 p.14) on the other.

One can trace in the contributions to *Interplay* which follow this Conference a growing awareness and response to issues of cultural diversity. This is not to say that practitioners had not been aware of these issues before 1993. For example the first issue of *Interplay* in November 1990 carried a piece by Diane Blumenthal which discussed the '...steps to counteract the tendency for playback groups to be composed of white, middle-class actors' (1990 p.3). Nevertheless, the issues of *Interplay* that appear before 1993 seem rather focussed on the white US and Australian culture.

Soon after the Finnish conference there appeared an issue of *Interplay* dedicated to 'context', which reflects, perhaps, a growing response to the Finnish experience. Then, in 1995, the IPTN made additions to their goals for playback theatre:

- We actively encourage the linking and connecting of Playback Theatre practitioners in the world.
- We encourage culturally diverse participation. (IPTN 1995 p.2)

The playback movement really seems to have grasped the implications of its internationalism in the March 1996 issue of *Interplay* and the January 1997 Conference in Australia. Of course, one must be aware in using written sources to trace these developments that they almost certainly post-date many discussions and debates within the movement. With this caveat, the March 1996 issue nevertheless remains a key one in marking a significant change in the development of playback with respect to issues of cultural diversity. With the subtitle 'What special education will white companies and actors need?' the movement seems to formally recognise for the first time the cultural limitations of the performer. More specifically Johnson asks,

Where will white conductors get training in decoding the African-American schema and story so that actors can playback these stories with integrity? (1996 p.4)

In the same issue Kimberley Rattley vividly focuses this question more specifically when she asks questions of the white actor playing stories of black oppression: 'How do white actors work through the taboo of saying racial slurs to fellow black actors in order to fully express the hostility of the story?' (1996 p.5)

It appears that, at least in this publication, the playback community was, for the first time, confronting the cultural limitations of the playback movement. The notion of the authentic actor able to respond to any story, no matter how culturally 'strange' was being brought into question. This is an important moment in the development of playback theatre. Implicit in the questions posed by these practitioners can be read an interrogation of other essentialist assumptions within playback discourse. For example, that there is

a 'heart' to the story; or that individual stories within playback become 'universal' stories; or that there is an unmediated 'presence' of the actor.

The spread of playback theatre across the globe has presented a severe challenge to the playback community and particularly to its founder, Jonathan Fox. He, together with other key figures (sometimes excruciatingly called 'elders') has been largely responsible for the dissemination of the playback form. Although their strategy has occasionally appeared missionary-like – white, middle-class Americans and Antipodeans 'spreading the news' – there has been a reluctance to impose control from the centre. There are now flourishing companies developing and adapting playback to their own communities. Cyril Alexander and his company Sterling Playback Theatre, based in Chennai, Southern India, provides an excellent example. To gain access to the local poor, they hold open performances on the beach and have adapted their staging and dramaturgy in response to that experience. He describes the beginning of the company and its unusually diverse membership:

The Sterling Playback Theatre started in 2000 after I attended the Practice course with Bev Hosking. I started the group with four of my friends and trained them in playback. I then gave several workshops to students, NGO members, street children and others. In this process some members from the workshop came and joined the Sterling Playback theatre group and that was how it slowly developed. So the members have different backgrounds - different religions, different casts, different ethnic groups, different socio-economic status, and other differences. The main thing is that they are all young. The most important aim of the Sterling Playback theatre group is to give this wonderful theatre to the people who are not able to get this kind of support elsewhere. (Alexander 2003 p.18)

Other examples of the localisation of playback include Emi Akahoshi and Kishu Tomii of Theatre Doa in Japan, who are developing a playback theatre

heavily influenced by Noh Theatre; Nurit Shoshan in Israel, who is adapting playback theatre to work with children traumatised by violence; Choi Hoi-Chiu and Michele Chung in Hong Kong, who are working with the Chinese concept of 'Five Basic Elements' and Tai-chi in their playback work; or Paul McIsaac, who has developed 'hip-hop playback' in New York City.

Concluding remarks

Batten's 'experiment' disturbed Conference delegates because it broke the usual and particular relationship between the personal and the public in playback theatre. What is striking is the homology between the Perth audience and playback's psychotherapy critics. Both believed that something unethical was taking place because the 'personal' was not being properly handled in the public domain. Both objected to the over-exposure of the personal. What both sets of complainants were doing was claiming that there is a proper and principled 'protocol' for the telling of personal stories in public spaces.

There is, of course, no established and universal 'protocol' that governs the telling of personal stories in public places – just as there are no settled definitions of what is meant by 'personal' and 'public'. There are only different positions in the negotiation of the personal and the public, definitions that are inevitably inflected by political, ethical and cultural assumptions. The objections to Batten reflected a deep unease about the relationship between the personal, the public and the political that had raged throughout the conference. It is ironic that having devoted their energies to the theme of

'cultural diversity' delegates were faced with a 'diverse' practice and objected to it.

Towards a conclusion.

Jonathan Fox finishes *Acts of Service* with the following words:

For me, what is most important is to create a theatre that is neither sentimental nor demonic, hermetic not confrontational, but ultimately a theatre of love. (1994 p.216)

I would argue however that 'love' is characterised by a consciousness of contingency, context and a realisation of our vulnerability and finitude. I am thinking here of Bataille's wish for an 'earthly love', that 'ousts transcendence' (1997 p.97). I have argued that the discourse of playback often seems to suggest a place beyond the contingent and mediated and, by doing so, it fails to convey the profoundly relational nature of the form. In other words, the 'jargon of authenticity' ends up expelling 'the humanness of the human'. I have tried to argue for ways of conceptualising playback theatre that recognise the inevitably incomplete, fallible and vulnerable nature of the performer's response to the teller's story.

For me, the most interesting playback is that which is a little irreverent, which plays, sometimes almost parodies, the meanings that may be attributed to the teller's story. It is axiomatic of the current interest in 'narrative therapy' that we can be trapped, as well as validated, by our own stories. Effective playback, through the processes of hermeneutic play, loosens the 'ties' of the story, opens up other possible interpretations and reveals the means through which we make sense of our experience. To paraphrase what Mary Douglas

says of the joke: an effective playback enactment 'is a play upon form that affords an opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity' (1975 p.96)

Slipping away.

Linda Hutcheon writes at the conclusion of *The Poetics of Postmodernism* that her work has tried 'to problematise and, thereby make us question. But it does not offer answers. It cannot without betraying its anti-totalising ideology' (1988 p.288). In this thesis I have proposed that playback enactments do not point back to the teller's past as much as point forward, as Adam Phillips (2002) might say, to a new, but never final 'translation'. Playback enactments are unfinalisable and so, in order to produce an account that is sympathetic to playback it would be contradictory to end with a conclusion that neatly summarised my findings or to convey, in some way, that the 'story' had ended.

Instead I will finish with an example of playback practice that is doubly unfinished. The enactment is not the end for the teller but just one more of a, perhaps endless, series of translations. For me, the conclusion of this thesis is just a hiatus in practising and thinking about playback theatre.

The enactment took place at a rehearsal weekend of the Manchester and York Playback Theatre Companies in June 2003. It excited me at the time because it seemed to exemplify the tension between the referential and the performative to which I have referred in this thesis. It also illustrated the reflexive nature of memory and its collective 're-membering' in the present. Moreover, it is a particularly interesting example because it involves a

'transgression' – a kind of 'irreverence'. The conductor chose not to cast the teller and, in doing so, as she explained, she found a way of representing her experience. But I would also argue that her decision significantly increased the level of polyphony and hermeneutic play. Identification slipped across and between the different non-cast actors. Identities were pluralized and complicated. Possible interpretations were multiplied.

I was in the audience for this enactment and I left immediately at its conclusion to write up some notes.

Slipping away.

Previously in that rehearsal I had described visiting my mother's grave for the first time. During the discussion that followed the enactment of my story, Susanna had said to me that she had not cried for her dead mother recently although her children sometimes did so. She seemed a little puzzled by this.

Later in the day she told a story. She described her feeling, and her fear, of 'slipping away' from full involvement in the weekend. She noted what she thought was a 'pattern' in weekends like this, in which she began being gregarious, vibrant and lively and then gradually started to withdraw. She told us that she had been thinking about her mother in whose presence she often felt she 'slipped away'. It was as if her mother did not fully notice her and did not give her the space to be herself. Her mother, she said, kept her 'at arm's length'. She extended her arm to illustrate this. The conductor asked her to cast her mother and she did so. Susanna continued that she sometimes worried that she would inadvertently behave like her mother toward her own

daughter. She felt though that this was not the case and she was able to allow her daughter room to grow. The conductor said, 'I am not going to cast you, is that OK?' Susanna replied that it was.

The enactment.

The actor playing Susanna's mother climbs onto a chair, centre-stage. She faces out toward the audience. A piece of golden cloth is draped over her shoulders. The three other uncast actors are spread out behind her; they wonder around aimlessly, as if they did not know what to do. The mother speaks, with a cut-glass accent, 'Come on Susanna. Help out. The people will be arriving for the party soon!' She is vivacious and gregarious, at the peak of her party-giving powers. An actor (perhaps playing Susanna?) falls suddenly and slides across the room – she is 'slipping away' – another actor follows in the same way. It is a surprising and powerful image of collapse. It is repeated again later. Unaware and uncomprehending of this sudden collapse, the mother turns to the audience and says 'I don't know where Susanna is'. Another of the actors – perhaps also Susanna – starts to copy the mother. She stands behind her mirroring her gregarious party behaviour. I think of Susanna copying her mother as a child and now doing so, again, maybe, at this weekend.

An actor screams – again I think it is Susanna. The scream builds. Still the mother is turned toward the audience. She says, again uncomprehending, 'There seems to be a drama going on behind me'. As the screaming actor opens her legs, I realise that her screams are the screams of childbirth. An actor crawls in between her legs. The new mother holds her baby.

Susanna's mother moves off to stage right. The mother and baby tableaux, so full of promise, turns into a scene in which the child is freely playing with her mother. Susanna's mother, now a grandmother, tries to make some contact with this new couple and, in a poignant moment, it is clear that it is hard, if not impossible, for her to do so. The scene ends as the actors turn toward the teller.

The teller.

Susanna has been clearly moved by the enactment, she says, a number of times 'It is a gift'. She goes on to say 'I know all of this intellectually, but I haven't seen it before'. She is pleased that the actor didn't use her phrase 'at arm's length' as she feels that would have been too obvious and predictable. She particularly noted the falling actors 'slipping away' across the stage.

The audience.

Members of the audience talk about experiences that were similar to Susanna's. They talked of mothers and fathers and of not being noticed. One person said 'My mother found it difficult to let me have feelings of my own. She always made them her own'. Another person described her mother as sometimes being a 'soul-sucker'.

The musician: 'one of those playback moments'.

Felicity, the musician, described how she could find no music to put in to the enactment. She said that the actors didn't listen and everything she

tried didn't seem to work. She said 'I ended up feeling I can't do playback, that I'm no good at it. That I should give it up.' Then she realised that '...of course, that is how the teller felt. *She* couldn't be heard. *She* couldn't find a place to get in.' It was, she said 'one of those playback moments.' To back this up she said that the only part in which she could find a way to contribute was near the end when the mother had retreated from centre stage and Susanna seemed to have more room.

The conductor.

Viv told us that she decided not to cast the teller because that would convey Susanna's sense of 'slipping away' when in the presence of her mother.

The writer

I asked permission to write up this enactment immediately afterwards. The issues that were raised resulting from the non-casting of the teller interested me. But I was also aware that I wanted to 'slip away'. Maybe I was fearful of the strong emotion evoked by this story. Or, perhaps worried about having to act next and follow that successful enactment, I 'slipped away'.

Appendix One

A list 'short forms' used in playback theatre.

The opening contributions – ‘moments’ in the York company – are usually enacted through ‘*the short forms*’. Although ‘fluid sculpts or sculptures’ and ‘pairs’ or ‘conflicts’ seem to be common throughout, these short forms do vary a little from company to company. Although short forms provide a structure for the action it is not uncommon for performers to ‘break the rules’ if they feel it will benefit the enactment.

The choice of which short form to use is made by the conductor, she will say something like ‘Let’s see this in a fluid sculpt’. Playback Theatre York have developed, as far as I can tell, an unusually large number of these short forms. These are set out below.

The short forms used by Playback Theatre York

1. Fluid Sculpt.

Upon hearing a moment or a short story any one of the actors moves forward and produces a movement with sound or words. They then, one by one, other actors join the developing sculpt. The piece concludes when the first actor freezes. Usually actors maintain their movement and sound throughout the piece, however, occasionally they will change in response to what the other actors are doing.

2. Three Solos (soli).

Three actors move forward and form a line. Beginning stage-right, actor 1 begins and moves with sounds and or words perhaps playing off

actors 2 and 3 (who do not generally respond). At some point and in any position, actor 1 freezes and this is the cue for actor 2 to begin. The general idea is that the three actors will show different and contrasting aspects of the story. The piece finishes with actor 3.

3. Three Voices.

In this 'short form' the idea is to build up a melody (or cacophony) of sounds that represent the teller's story. As in 'Three Solos', three actors move forward into a line. This form has three stages.

- a) Actor 1 gives a voice and sound without movement or significant expression. When this actor concludes she is followed by Actor 2 and when she is finished by Actor 3.
- b) All three actors then make their sounds simultaneously.
- c) The three actors now vary their own sound, respond to each other and pick up and repeat the sounds of others. They improvise together around the sounds that have been developed.

4. Three Stops.

As many actors as wish to, come forward, the story is played in three short scenes each concluded by a freeze in the action. This is used only rarely by Playback Theatre York because, I think, of the difficulties of finding the freeze points together.

5. Free Impro.

Personal stories in public places: an investigation of playback theatre.
Nick Rowe. March 2005

All actors step forward into the space and an improvisation commences.

6. Poetry and music.

One of the actors volunteers to be the 'poet'. The 'poet' sits on a chair centre stage and a musician sits either on the floor or in a chair next to him. The poet creates a poem in response to the teller's story and the musician accompanies or takes the lead accordingly. This form is occasionally used in performance but regularly used in rehearsal.

7. Pairs.

This short form is used to work with conflicting emotions, wishes or motivations. The actors are in pairs; one actor stands behind the other. Having heard the conflict, the partners take on the two 'sides'. Then, either back-to-back and revolving, or facing the front, they play out the two sides of the stated conflict. There are three variations to pairs in the York Company:

a) B quickly tells A which side of the conflict they are going to be playing and whether it will be played back to back or facing the front. This is now no longer used. Members of the Company prefer variation (b).

b) No discussion takes place and the first partner to start defines the action.

c) If we are working with an odd number of actors then one may embody both sides of the conflict.

8. Chorus.

In 'chorus' the actors work together, usually in close physical proximity and with few words. Generally the aim is to produce synchronised sounds and movements. This is also incorporated in the 'full story' when, usually uncast, actors form a chorus to comment on or add to the enactment.

10. Tableau.

This form is usually used when the conductor or the teller feels that the actors have missed an element from the enactment or when the conductor wishes to quickly summarise a moment, story or a feeling in the audience. The actors simply form a tableau and hold it for a short time.

11. Chorus 'Interruptus'.

This form was developed with the Amsterdam Playback Theatre Company. A chorus begins and, at a point of their choosing, the musicians 'interrupt' it with music. When they do, the actors freeze into a tableau. The actors choose when to interrupt the musicians with movement and sound.

Other forms used by other companies of which I am aware are:

12. Transformations.

This is used when the story involves a clear transformation from one state to another. The actors usually work together as in a chorus and move from one state to another, charting the passage through the 'transformation'.

13. The Wise Being.

In this form, usually used at the end of a performance, a teller is told that the actors will answer any question put to them by the audience through a choric enactment. The audience is directed to non-prophetic, quasi-philosophical questions. I have seen this form performed only once by an all-male company – Playback Jack based in Perth, Australia. I asked the 'wise being' 'What is the spirit of Australia?' having newly arrived in the continent. It is not a form used by Playback Theatre York. We experimented with the form some time ago (in Autumn 1999) but found it difficult to do without giggling or lapsing into oracular declamation.

14. Tableau stories.

The Melbourne Company developed this short form. The conductor divides a story into a series of titles and as he or she calls them out, the actors form a still tableau to portray each title.

15. Action Haiku.

This short form is described by Jo Salas (1993 p.41) as a form suitable for use at the conclusion of a performance. The audience call out themes that they are aware of from the performance. One actor stands centre stage and makes a statement derived from one of those themes. For example 'There is a gaping hole inside me' might be a statement derived from the theme of 'Loss'. Another actor then sculpts that actor's body in a way that is expressive of loss. This continues with other statements.

Appendix Two.

Lexicon of playback theatre. A list compiled in 1997, at the beginning of the thesis.

short form	non-literal	cliché
fluid sculpt	essence (of the story)	stereotype
three voices	trance	archetype
tableaux	taking a risk	play from the heart
three stops	presence of the actor	metaphor
three solos	being authentic	connecting with the audience (conductor)
pairs	capturing the teller's truth	wafting
free impro	a good story for playback	soundscape
the invocation	a travel story	slow motion
chorus	cultural reference	on/use the diagonal
cloth	unfolding	protagonist
the 'teller'	a technical discussion	casting objects
literal	the teller's actor	symbolic
dance	minimal	bringing themes together
movement	operatic moments	One story healing another
moments of danger	take/give centre stage	economic use of cloth
mingle	neutral	disengage the brain
final fluid	just step into the space	trust the process
opening moments	reject/accept an offer	be real
take your time	listen to each other	a healing story
respect the cloth	look for contrasts	sense of connection
headless chickens	fairy tale structures	honour the story
be true	Image	set the scene
playing the jack	letting go	status
stillness	mirroring	significant moments
silence	point of conflict	ritual
undercurrent (of a story)	universal stories	pace
passing the ball (action)	the personal and the political.	soundscapes
narrator	loyal to the teller's story.	subtext
alter ego		
inner voice		

Appendix Three

Playback theatre: a short story.

Rona had arrived half an hour early to put the heater on, but still the room felt cold. It was the kind of damp cold you get in English church halls in November. The heater only served to create the promise of warmth, a promise which Rona knew would never be realised before the others arrived. She sighed and began to fill the hot water boiler.

'I'm going to make sure I tell a story tonight' she thought to herself as she gathered the chipped and stained coffee mugs together.

She began to wonder what story she would tell. It was never easy to decide. There was the one about Helen, her work colleague, who had argued with her over the meaning of the word 'spirituality', the row had been a flaming one, and in retrospect, Rona was sure that it was about something far more important than they were acknowledging. Perhaps, the company would help her to work it out.

Or perhaps she should tell the one about her father phoning earlier in the week. He never phoned, well only for discussions about money or travel direction, so when Rona heard him say 'Hello love, it's Dad', she was both surprised and a little anxious.

'I thought I'd phone for a chat. Your mother is out and there's nothing on the TV, so I thought why not phone my daughter. How are things?'

'Fine' replied Rona and began to tell him about the changes in work that had been concerning her so much recently. This was the usual pattern of their

conversations, Rona would talk of her work and he would interject with stories from his own working life which were intended as advice, but which only irritated Rona. As she launched into a detailed explanation of management reorganisations, Rona was aware that something was different, usually her father would have interrupted by now; usually he would have begun one of his stories intended as an illustration of what she was saying. But today there was a silence. A demanding, blackening silence was expanding into the space between them. Rona's monologue was beginning to lose its energy and purpose, as this silence sucked the strength from her. She stopped abruptly. There was a silence, then her father said,

'I've been to the hospital today.'

'Yes, I could tell that story' she thought as she sat by the heater trying to gather the warmth into her thin body. Usually Rona was pleased with her body. She had been something of a dancer in her twenties and still, in her mid- forties, and after two children, she had a poise and a freedom of movement which marked her out. But at this moment, sitting in front of a single heater in a damp English church hall in November, she did not feel pleased with her body at all.

Rona's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the outside door being opened, and as she rose to her feet, Bruno entered opening his arms to invite Rona into one of his big warm embraces. Rona and Bruno had known each other for nearly five years, and over that time, through all the rehearsals and performances, a physical easiness had grown between them. As Bruno drew her to him, she enjoyed the soft roundness of his body and exhilarating smell of the outside world he had brought him with him.

'How's your daughter?' asked Rona. Bruno's 14-year-old daughter had been seriously ill recently and this had put enormous stress on the whole family. As Bruno said at the last rehearsal, 'Her illness has made us all question what we are doing together... we don't use the word family any more.'

'She's much better' said Bruno, and he went on to tell her of the endless visits to hospital and the sleepless nights they had spent sitting by her bedside. As Bruno spoke Ron's mind drifted to her father's phone call...

'Yes, I must tell a story tonight' she thought to herself.

Rona squeezed Bruno's hand.

By now other members of the company had arrived. Bridget, Laura, Amanda, Fran and Lawrence were standing in a circle laughing about something.

As Rona caught sight of the gathering company, she felt a small knot of dread that usually accompanied her on these occasions. There was little real sense to it; she'd known these people for years and they were, she knew, glad to see her. Every group of people finds its own way of handling those difficult moments of meeting. The tricky questions about whether to hug, kiss, shake hands or merely nod to each other, are answered, or at least eased by establishing patterns of behaviour that suit the group and its aims. This group had evolved a style of meeting which comprised of hugging and kissing accompanied by shouting, screaming and laughing. It was a very noisy affair which, to the outsider, would confirm whatever prejudices they had about ' theatre ' people as being rather insincere and over-demonstrative.

It was not so much the hugging which caused Rona that small sense of dread, but the moments in-between. Having hugged and exchanged greetings with Bridget and established that they were both 'Fine', she found herself, for a moment, alone. It was this she found so difficult. Watching uncertainly as others greeted each other with far more fulsomeness than she felt she could muster. It seemed to her that they were far more at ease than she was, far more able to receive warmth from each other. In her worst moments these thoughts would burrow into her, subtly affecting all her relations the others in the company.

But there was another feeling that always seemed to be present during the only moments of each rehearsal. This was a kind of excitement and anticipation, which could not quite find an object and so was always accompanied by mild disappointment. It reminded her of when she was a child and her father, returning home from work, would play with her for a few minutes before turning his attention to the newspaper or a discussion with her mother and she was left stranded with feelings that had no outlet.

By now Bridget, Amanda and Lawrence had got their coffees and formed a smoking group outside in the cold November air. Rona joined them,

'Can I scrounge a cigarette off someone?'

'I thought you'd given up' said Amanda as she passed a packet of cigarettes to Rona.

'I have. It's great to be a non smoker!' She said that she watched the blue smoke swirling in the night air. Everyone laughed and joined in one of greatest pleasures of smokers: its delicious conspiracy.

'Let's get started!' shouted Laura from inside and the smokers took their last drags and made their way into the hall.

* * *

A group of seven people stood in a circle. Rona began her customary series of stretches which were so familiar they required no thought. Bruno slapped his belly letting out deep roaring sounds. Amanda and Lawrence leant against each other back to back, while Bridget sang, trying to match the rhythm of Bruno's belly slapping. It was the usual beginning for this group.

'Let's do some warming up' said Laura. 'Does anyone want to lead us in something?'

Amanda suggested this game in which each person close their eyes and tried to find their partner by calling out a pre-agreed signal, and the rehearsal began.

* * *

'I've got a story!' shouted Rona as she moved toward the storyteller's chair. She had to move quickly otherwise someone would get there before her. She was determined to tell a story this week since, over the last few rehearsals, she had missed out. Either she did not think of one or one of the others got there before her, but tonight she was going to make sure. She landed on the chair, skidding as she did so from the speed of arrival, and waited for one of the company to sit on the chair next to her. Laura joined her and said,

'So what your story, Rona?'

The truth was that Rona had been in such a rush to get to the chair that she hadn't totally decided. She hoped that when she got there it would be

clear what she wanted to say, and now, with Laura and the whole group waiting, she experienced a moment of panic. 'I'm wasting people's time' she thought to herself.

'It's about my father' she said finally.

'OK' said Laura 'Choose someone to be you.'

Rona looked at the line of four actors sitting on chairs in front of a rack of coloured cloth. Who would she choose to play her? As her eyes moved along the group she was drawn to Bridget. It was something about the way she was sitting in the chair, slightly slumped as if pressed down by some force, a tension in her face and, unlike some of the others, not looking at Rona. It was likely, Rona thought, that Bridget did not want to be chosen, but there was something about her vulnerability, her reluctance, that drew Rona to say 'Bridget'. Bridget stood up.

'OK, so tell me about your story' said Laura putting her hand on Rona's knee. Rona spoke of the phone call from her father and the darkening silence that had seemed to push out everything between them, filling the space with its demanding presence.

'It made me feel cold' said Rona, suddenly feeling cold herself. 'I can feel it now. '

'Describe it to us' said Laura.

'Its kind of bleak and very, very empty... well, empty yes, but also a lonely, bereft, like...' Rona paused for a minute. 'It's like Sunday evenings at boarding school, in November, it's getting darker and colder and there are weeks and weeks before Christmas. Dark, cold, Victorian, cheerless buildings. That's what it was like.'

Rona hadn't expected to say the last bit, but having done so she felt a little leap of excitement, an almost sexual excitement.

'OK' said Laura 'So what happened next?'

'My father said that he had been to the hospital and he'd had some tests and was waiting for the results — something to do with pains in his stomach. He'd never told me about than before.'

'Choose someone to be your father' said Laura.

Again Rona looked at the actors. This time she had no doubt. 'Bruno' she said, and Bruno sprang to his feet as if he had always known he would be chosen.

'Give Bruno some words to describe your father in this story.'

'Oh, I don't know, I think he was a little nervous, a little irritated by me going on about work... it was so strange for him to phone and he seemed ill at ease.'

Laura patted Rona's hand as she said, looking toward the actors 'This is Rona's story of a phone call with her father. Let's watch.'

Bruno felt he was bursting. His heart was thumping hard and he had a sick feeling. He knew Rona would choose him and he knew what he would do. Well no, that wasn't quite true. It would be more accurate to say would he had no worries about what he would do. An insistent energy would carry him. Amanda's music was feeding that energy, viscerally changing Bruno, and he used it to find his place on the stage. He dragged one of the chairs into the centre of the stage, and drawing himself in as tightly as he could manage, he sat on the chair and waited. He knew that the other actors would be forming a tableau around him but he couldn't see anything, they must all be behind him.

He could hear, but not see, movement. It went silent and, it seemed to Bruno, rather dark. They too were waiting, he guessed.

There is a directional instruction that the company had often spoken about. It was that if, as an actor, you do not know what to say it is often effective to say how you are feeling at that moment because it is probably related to the character you are playing. Remembering this, Bruno said,

'I can't see you, its dark here. Where are you?'

Enclosed tightly, as he was by his arms and by the hardness of the chair, Bruno waited. It seemed to him that his words were spreading a cold darkness across the stage and, he guessed, were freezing the actors. He felt a moment of panic. 'They don't know what to do with this,' he thought.

However, he was determined to stay with it, to wait. He could hear movement in the darkness, a quick movement across the stage to somewhere in front and to the left of him. There was silence and then a sound, he wasn't sure, but it was as if someone's lips were moving, mouthing sounds with no words. There was something terrible about this sound and, in the darkness, he felt, for a fleeting moment, a terrible emptiness. The sound had a nightmarish quality, like a child calling for help through sheets of impenetrable glass. He could hear some movement too and he imagined grotesque, spastic movements.

He called out 'I can hear you! Do you need help?' The sound continued, oblivious to his call. He repeated, 'I can hear you! Do you need help?' There was no response.

A voice whispered in his ear 'Can you not hear her? She needs your help'. Bruno experienced a shock; he had been so caught up in that sound in the darkness that he had totally forgotten about the other actors.

'Open your eyes; look at her.' continued the voice.

Bruno couldn't open his eyes. If he did everyone would see him, and he couldn't bear the thought of that.

'I can't, she'll see me.' he found himself saying.

'What will she see?' asked the voice which he now identified as Lawrence. Bruno didn't know, or at least, he couldn't find the words for it. He felt exposed and suddenly aware of Rona and Laura watching him. He felt he was holding things up, he worried he was boring everyone. It seemed all of a sudden, rather boring, self indulgent and not very good theatre. He had forgotten Rona's story and was now somehow playing out his own. Almost unbearably the face of his daughter formed in his mind - that terrible look of accusing pain that she had given him when she first went into hospital.

With a massive effort of will Bruno said 'I've been to the hospital today, I've had some tests.'

He opened his eyes. What surprised him first was the light. The harsh light of the church hall seemed so merciless, so terribly everyday. They hid nothing and so showed nothing. He then saw the source of those strange mouthing sounds: it was Bridget. Of course, he knew it would be her but nevertheless he was surprised. He was surprised by the presence of her – a vulnerable presence, looking at him, present, sensual, alert.

'Why didn't you tell me before, Dad?' Said Bridget

'I didn't want to worry you, it may be nothing - and there's no point worrying about things that may never happen' and warming to a theme which suddenly occurred to him and struck him as characteristic of Rona's father, he continued:

'Don't worry! Smile, it may never happen!. You've got to keep going, no point in worrying, you'll make yourself ill.'

For the first time Bruno was aware of Rona. He heard a sound like a sigh or a stifled laugh. He then realised that Bridget was angry with him.

'Smile... that's what you always do...so much talking and smiling, you never listen, do you? You never listen...'

'Whoa, hold your horses. Wait one doggone minute.' Where this came from Bruno had no idea, clichés were piling up, one upon the other, and Bruno seemed to have no control over them. He was still in the chair but was now leaning forward, his hand reaching out towards Bridget to silence her. He wondered if he should go over to her but he rejected the idea. There had to be that space between them. It was filled with tension, longing and fear.

Then Bridget turned toward the audience.

'He always does this, he silences me , not by force but by a kind of tenderness..' She searches for the words. 'Everything is so fragile.... the fear that if I speak I will break him, destroy him - destroy us.' She emphasises the 'us' surprised by the power of this idea.

For the first time Bruno is aware of Amanda. She has been playing a steady insistent beat throughout, but it is only now that he really hears her, she sings with a plaintive, resonant voice,

' A kind of tenderness

He destroys me

With a kind of tenderness.'

Bridget turns to Bruno and across the space, which seems, at this minute, vast to Bruno, she says,

'You couldn't hear me could you?

When it was getting darker and colder,

When you were so far away

and it seemed so long until Christmas

you couldn't hear me.

And now Dad, I don't know

how to hear you.'

Bridget turns to Rona, the singing stops and there is silence. Bruno sees the tears on Rona's cheeks and realises he is shivering.

Laura reaches into her pocket, finds a tissue and hands it to Rona,

'Well, Rona...'

Rona hated this bit; she always felt that she had to say something. She really wanted to let it settle, take it in, hold onto it and not share it with anyone else. The actors were looking at her expectantly.

'I don't know what to say' she said wiping her eyes and blowing her nose.

'It was when Bridget said 'a kind of tenderness'.... that broke my heart. There is a tenderness there.... but there's no....' She searched for the word. 'That's it.... there's no robustness. I wish we could shout at each other a bit more...

and Bruno, when you said, 'smile, it may never happen' it was so like him!
Everyone laughed.

'I was worried I had gone over the top' said Bridget 'I just felt so angry when he said that bit about smiling, I want to hit him'... she growled and hit Bruno on the arm.

'Ow!' he cried 'I couldn't just bear you to be worried... it was like I was talking to Sally...' he suddenly broke off and there was a pause.

'Of course! I hadn't thought of that... I knew I had to choose you to be my dad.' 'I knew you would' Bruno smiled and Rona returned his smile.

Lawrence looked miserable. Laura asked 'what's wrong Lawrence?'

'I don't know I feel so out of it... probably to do with not having a role.'

'Have you a story?'

'Yes', said Lawrence

Rona, Bruno, Bridget and Fran sat on the actors' chairs and Amanda returned to her music.

* * * * *

Appendix Four

Deliverance.

A recording of an enactment during a Playback Theatre York performance to members of 'The North East Change Council' in Newcastle upon Tyne. July 2001.

<p><i>The 'Performer'</i></p>	<p>The reflecting actor</p>
<p>1. <i>The teller describes a period in his life in which he was 'desperate' and in a state of 'terror'. He chooses me to play him. I stand up.</i></p>	<p>1. As the only male actor in the acting team I suspected that I might be chosen. As soon as I stood up I was reminded of a previous performance in which I had played a man who had been through a significant period of mental ill health. (This is detailed as <i>Experiences from the Deep End</i> in <i>Appendix Five</i>) I had felt that had been successful and so I was keen to play the part.</p>
<p>2. <i>He says that during his period of 'depression' his mother had died. It was a time in which he was overwhelmed and distressed by persecutory thoughts. He spent days in his room, afraid to come out. He describes how, after his mother's death, he moved back to the North East and gradually began to improve with the help of family and friends. The conductor asks him for a title, he suggests 'Deliverance'. He gives an image of himself on top of a mountain with friends looking down and celebrating his deliverance.</i></p>	<p>2. I felt a strong identification with the teller – I recognised the obsession with persecutory thoughts, the wish to hide and I thought I knew what he meant by the word 'deliverance'. I was reminded of a period in my life when I had had similar experiences.</p>
<p>3. <i>The conductor says, 'Let's watch'. I wait by the side of the stage. The musician plays. I listen hoping to find something in their music that will help me. I notice my breathing is becoming heavier and there are 'churning' feelings in my stomach. I concentrate on these feelings.</i></p>	<p>3. Although I did not know how the enactment would develop, I knew that these physical experiences would provide me with movement and sound to begin the piece. One way of putting this is that what I would do would come from the breathing and the stomach.</p>

<p><i>4. When the music stops I take a position centre stage. I scream out; my hands come together to 'stab' into my stomach and as they do so I 'double up' –I repeat this a few times. As I do so the musician matches the stabs with strong drum beats.</i></p> <p><i>One of the other actor places some black netting on my head.</i></p>	<p>4. I had used these movements before in other performances and rehearsals.</p> <p>The thoughts I recall as this was happening were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• That I may frighten or disturb the audience.• I remembered a performance where I had screamed out and one or two members of the audience had laughed, so momentarily I worried that my screams would produce that reaction again.• As I continued the stabbing movements I remembered a statue in a small Normandy church of the Virgin Mary with seven knives in her torso. The statue was entitled <i>Notre Dames des Sept Doleurs</i>.• I also began to worry that this could go on too long and I had no idea where to go next, I hoped that one of the other actors would help.

<p>5. <i>The other actors form into a chorus to my right, they shout, to the rhythm of the musician's drum beats, 'Hide'; 'Pain'; 'I can see you'.</i></p> <p><i>I recoil from them, pulling one of the chairs to protect me. They throw across other chairs and I build a circle with them.</i></p> <p><i>A chair slips from my grasp and falls forward with a crash onto the toes of a spectator in the front row. I pull it back onto the stage.</i></p> <p><i>I am now 'hiding' behind the chairs, looking out at the other actors as if asking for their help but retreating if they come closer.</i></p> <p><i>The chairs are protecting 'me' – they are my prison and my shelter.</i></p> <p><i>I start to worry about how to get out.</i></p>	<p>5. The chorus and the musicians gave me the direction.</p> <p>Hiding behind the chairs seemed right to me. Depression might be seen as building a shelter that becomes a prison.</p> <p>I remember worrying that I had gone too far. I felt ashamed, for a second, like a child whose over-exuberance is checked by the adults.</p> <p>I am reliant on the other actors to get 'me' out of here. Both the character and the actor need to find a way out.</p>
<p>6. <i>Still hiding behind the chairs looking out to the audience as emphatically as I can, I say, 'And then my mother died'. I repeat the phrase.</i></p>	<p>6. As I repeated the phrase I hoped that it 'would take me somewhere' or that it would be a cue for one of the other actors to initiate something.</p>
<p>7. <i>One of actors comes forward toward me. Slowly she starts to remove one of the chairs. I pull it back, but gradually I allow her to take it away. She reaches out a hand to draw me away. At first I retreat – only very slowly do I reach out toward her. Our hands touch. Quickly withdraw mine as if her hand is too hot and I have been burnt. Now I am standing outside the</i></p>	<p>7. Here is the very familiar sequence, 'the gradual and tentative meeting'. I knew exactly where it would go, and that I needed only to match the pace of the other actor. I knew that it would end up in some image of closer relationship.</p>

'shelter' of chairs.

Eventually I allow her to hold my hand. She slowly turns it over. We both look at it. I feel delight in being so close to the actor. I enjoy the attention that I am getting. I look at my hand, I am struck by its fleshiness, its vulnerability, it seemed that there is something precious held in it.

I say, with pleasure and discovery, 'It hurts, and I can feel it!' I repeat this phrase.

I start to remove the black netting that had been placed on my head earlier. It is painful to remove – it is like a plaster being torn from my head.

The other actors surround me now. One had placed a golden coloured cloth on my shoulders. 'What do you see?' asks an actor. I reply, 'Deliverance'

I enjoyed this moment. My sense of isolation that was activated by playing the character is appeased. At the same time the beginning of the character's 'deliverance' is represented.

This phrase felt right to me at that moment. Emerging out of depression the protagonist was beginning to feel

	<p>again.</p> <p>I was pleased with this image at the time. I reflected that depression could be difficult to remove, like a plaster being torn from the scalp.</p>
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Appendix Five

Experiences from the Deep End.

A Playback Theatre York Performance that took place in February 2000 at a Centre for users of Mental Health Services in Newcastle upon Tyne.

'T' had earlier given his story a title, *Experiences from the Deep End* and he had already contributed to the performance by telling us about his hangover, which we had played as a 'fluid sculpt'. I was unsure whether he was a member of staff or one of the users of the centre. He sat separately and I thought he was a handsome and well-dressed young man.

His story was set in Australia about ten years previously. He had been travelling through the continent on what he thought of as a 'voyage of discovery'. The excitement, sense of achievement and adventure made him feel happy and 'good about myself for the first time'. He told us that he felt that he had 'found his feet' and they were 'firmly planted on the ground' and he felt 'rooted' for the first time.

As the only male actor, I thought it likely that he would choose me to play him. I hoped he would do so, as I was drawn to him and was beginning to get an idea of how to play the part. He told us that, as he reached the heart of the Australian continent and was visiting Ayers Rock, he began to lose his 'footing'. He began to 'over-reach' himself. He said,

'I began to believe unrealistic things about myself. I began to believe that I could be a model or an actor, that I could do anything I wanted.'

These feelings grew in intensity and he began to become what he later (after psychiatric intervention) called 'manic'. These feelings gradually gave way to depression and he was hospitalised and eventually flown home to be re-united with his worried and concerned family. At home, surrounded by his friends and family he began to improve and he told us,

'What I have learned is that I need people around me to help me feel grounded.'

The teller cast me as the actor to play him and, as I stood listening to his story, the central metaphorical cluster of 'finding my feet', 'being grounded', 'losing my footing' and being 'rooted' played in my mind. It gave me the 'key' to my performance.

I had another idea as I stood listening to the story. Before the performance began, I had been talking to the others about the proscenium stage that was behind our set. I had joked about finding a way to use it in the performance. As T. told his story, I wondered about using the stage as the place to denote his 'over-reaching' of himself. The mixture of his separation from others and his described 'narcissistic' desire, would be interesting portrayed on this stage. I decided against the use of the proscenium stage. Perhaps it was too far, too chilling an image of his breakdown. I spoke to Susanna about this after the performance and she said, 'Yes, you could have hidden from us behind the curtains and got lost in the curtain's folds.'

Instead, when the performance began, I used the feeling of feet firmly set on the ground as my starting point and the impulse for further action. As I concentrated on planting my feet firmly on the ground, I became aware of how

difficult it was for me to feel balanced, to find the poise, balance and steadiness that, I imagine, is characteristic of dancers.

As the improvisation continued, I began to lose my footing. I careered across the stage, over-balanced, nearly fell and was pushed by other actors. I was lost in these movements and hoped that the others would find a way for me to change the pace of the piece.

Eventually, I fell to the ground, exhausted. The depression had arrived and I felt empty. I knelt, breathless and stared vacantly into the audience. It seemed as if cloth and the 'concern' of the others covered me. I recoiled from it, wanting to be left alone.

Gradually, and carefully, I was lifted to my feet and surrounded. The image I wanted was of a sapling, surrounded by older, more deeply rooted trees, which held and stop me from blowing over.

We turned to the teller. Our eyes met. I felt from the teller a sense of recognition. A brief intimate moment of contact – a blurring of identity.

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