Playback Theatre

Inciting Dialogue and Building Community through Personal Story

Hannah Fox

Playback Theatre in Cuba

3 January 2006, 8:00 A.M. We are in a fast-moving taxi on the way to La Habana Vieja (Old Havana) heading towards the theatre space where the Playback Theatre workshop will be held. I look out the window and see many people in short-sleeved shirts and sundresses walking and riding their bikes to work. The Malecón, the famous promenade lining the blue Caribbean Sea, stretches out on our left. On our right we pass by a row of once regal and colorful buildings, many crumbling and some being repaired. Sounds of salsa and son music spill out of open-air shops and restaurants. There are no billboards advertising Coca-Cola or Nike or Calvin Klein on this ride, only the ubiquitous faces of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro follow us wherever we go.

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We are riding in one of the taxis designated for tourists—a beat-up old Toyota with ripped seat covers and exhaust spewing into the back seat, not one of the historic lemon yellow or mint green ’57 Chevys often associated with Cuba. The roads are full of these classic cars, but they run as colectivos—taxis for Cubans only. Colectivo drivers are forbidden to pick up tourists. It is against the law. Likewise, Cubans are not allowed into the tourist hotels, unless they work there as maids, bellhops, cooks, or musicians. The sharp divide between economies in Cuba, between locals and foreigners, has become more rigid over the past ten years.

This is the first week of a four-week Playback Theatre training intensive. There will be a new teacher each week: three from the United States, one from Brazil. During the first week, I will be teaching an intermediate/advanced level of training focused on ensemble acting, conducting (facilitation with the audience), and performance skills. There are 27 participants signed up, with several more on a waiting list. The participants in the taller (workshop) are primarily professional actors and directors, as well as teachers, a few psychologists, and one cultural anthropologist. They come from Havana and the Cuban countryside, Argentina, Chile, and the US. On this first day the workshop begins almost 45 minutes late, as it will most days, with the participants trickling in two by two, many of them sweaty and disheveled from walking miles through the city to reach the theatre. Stories about the severe transportation problem in Cuba (scarce and crowded buses, unaffordable taxis, no ownership of personal vehicles) will be a recurring theme as the workshop progresses, as will stories of struggle in general. Despite the late start, the room is charged with anticipation and excitement about practicing Playback together.

This is my second time teaching Playback Theatre in Cuba. Once again I am struck, in fact, lifted, by the passionate energía of the group, an almost palpable electricity. Conducting Playback workshops across the world, one notices the different personalities of groups. Playback Theatre companies—for instance, in Japan, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, New Zealand, Burundi, Israel, India, UK, Philippines, Sweden, Brazil, the US—each possesses a unique mode of expression reflective of its respective culture.

I find the Cuban style of Playback to be animated, feisty, and straight from the heart. Participants seem ready from the get-go to express their deepest fears, their pain, and their revelations. The telling is honest, with little pretense. Revolution hangs in the air, on signs in the streets, on people’s lips, and permeates the actors’ choices onstage. The Cubans are frustrated by their strained and difficult living conditions—an angry not only at Fidel Castro but in large part at Bush and the US government. Their lives are full of sharp contradictions. On the one hand they desperately yearn to have a more consistent and affordable food supply, access to phones and the internet, easier transportation, travel overseas, new clothes, updated machinery, etc. On the other hand, many Cubans deeply believe in Castro’s socialist regime and ideals (“Fidel-ity”) and harbor strong feelings against capitalism. Perhaps because there is so much at stake every day, and perhaps because here art is made not for profit but with the conviction that art is a hammer with which to change society, I find this Havana circle of actors to be refreshingly awake and alive. As artists they seem to carry themselves with a sense of pride and purpose, as though they hold torches.

The Cuban government empowers its artists to be cultural ambassadors and disseminators, community activists, and instruments of change, or as anthropologist Laurie Frederik Meer says, “as vehicles of communication between people and state” (2005:419). This empowerment is not just nominal; the government pays its artists to do their work. Remarkably the artist in Cuba—the musician, the dancer, the singer, the painter, the actor, the poet—is highly valued, respected, and supported on a national level.

Figure 1. (previous page) Playback performance at the end of Hannah Fox’s Havana workshop in 2006. A young girl in the audience told about the time her father hit his head and lost his memory. The actor's scarf signifies the erasure of memory. (Photo by Laurie Frederik Meer)
American practitioner Pearl Friedman\(^1\) brought the Playback Theatre technique to Cuba in March 2000. The idea of spontaneous performance based on life stories told by audience members was at the time a relatively new and radical performance concept and community-building tool in Cuba, where since approximately 1961, under Cuban socialism, artists have been censored controlled by the State.\(^2\) Since Playback was first introduced, its methods have taken off. Cubans have been flocking to the training workshops and there are now numerous groups of actors, musicians, social workers, and educators trained in Playback’s spontaneous, interactive style.

Playback is being used all over the island—with youth groups, in AIDS clinics, with rural farmers, in artists’ colonies, at educational conferences, in parks with the general public, with ministry government officials.

Why has Playback caught on in Cuba? The larger question of course, and what I hope to investigate in this article, is: Why has Playback Theatre succeeded as a global movement, with practitioners using the method in 55 countries (IPTN n.d.)?\(^2\)

**Community Theatre and the Citizen Actor**

Playback is just over 30 years old. As we celebrate this landmark, it is an opportune time to pause and speculate why Playback has made such an impact. The Playback Theatre method is humble: trained actors and a musician act out life stories volunteered by audience members. It happens on a bare stage. There are no costumes, no scripts. Playback can happen in a traditional theatre, a classroom, a living room, or on the street. Telling the stories of everyday citizens is central to Playback. Playback is community theatre—not “community theatre,” typically understood in the US as comprising time-tested scripts, such as *Oklahoma* or *Our Town*, played in local theaters, but *Teatro Comunitario* as it is known in Cuba: theatre by, for, and about the people. Like Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback Theatre gives voice and visibility to especially those most often overlooked and ignored.

In a typical Playback Theatre performance there is a facilitator, called the “conductor,” who interfaces with the public, inviting individuals in the audience to share life stories, which the team of actors, accompanied by a musician, then acts out. There are various short and long Playback forms used, depending on the size and nature of the story. The person sharing is called the “teller,” as in storyteller.

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1. Pearl Friedman prefers to use a pseudonym so as to avoid harassment by the US government regarding her work in Cuba.
2. Under Cuban socialism, what artists say and do is censored and approved by the State.
Regardless of their training, Playback actors emphasize their roles as *citizen actors* whose priority is to serve society as agents of change. Individual stories from the community are used as beacons to illuminate more general patterns and situations.

In *Local Acts*, Jan Cohen-Cruz details the history and theory of “community performance” in the United States. She writes, “Community-based art is a field in which artists, collaborating with people whose lives directly inform the subject matter, express collective meaning” (2005:1). Community-based performance not only empowers people to share and reflect upon their experiences, but also acts as a vehicle for social change. Playback Theatre is part of this genre.

**The Beginnings**

Playback Theatre was conceived in the early 1970s in upstate New York by Jonathan Fox and developed by Fox, his wife, Jo Salas, and his team of actors, the original Playback Theatre Company (known then as “Playback Theatre” as only one company existed). I am the daughter of Fox and Salas. Inspired by the American experimental theatre movement, psychodrama, and the oral tradition of indigenous cultures, J. Fox created Playback Theatre as an informal, everyday theatre, which honored community experience at its core. When asked where his inspiration came from, J. Fox recalls his dream of “a new kind of theatre that brought theatre back from the domain of entertainment to its earlier purpose of preserving memory and holding the tribe together” (Fox 2000). Interested in ancient ritual gatherings, J. Fox wanted to find a way to “recapture that kind of ceremonial enactment in which there is no distinction between art and healing, [and to] embody a transformational ritual that could be a source for hope without whitewashing what is wrong with the world” (Fox and Dauber 1999:14). Salas remembers, “We hoped to offer ordinary people a place to see and celebrate and explore their stories. And to use creativity and art to pay attention to unheard voices and to bring people together” (Salas 2000). Storytelling is at the root of the form, according to Salas: “People need to tell their stories. It’s a basic human imperative. From the telling of our stories comes our sense of identity, our place in the world, and our compass of the world itself” (1993:111). Influenced by Jerzy Grotowski, Antonin Artaud, and Paulo Freire, J. Fox and the original company developed a form of spontaneous performance whose intention was to illuminate life experiences—rather than camouflage or distort them—by honoring whatever narratives arose in the moment. J. Fox and company were interested in creating a theatre of immediacy, a ritual where audience members were truly (to use Boal’s term) “spect-actors” (1992:15).

After a series of open rehearsals, the company performed for the public every first Friday of the month. They also began performing in hospitals, schools, prisons, and at conferences. In 1980, four members of the original company were invited by the Drama Action Center in Sydney, Australia, to conduct a series of Playback Theatre workshops and performances. Playback was received abroad with excitement and enthusiasm, with full workshops and sold out performances in both Australia and New Zealand. Other Playback companies began to sprout: first in Australia and then in Switzerland and Sweden; a few years later, in Japan; and next in England, the US, Canada, Germany, Russia, Hungary, Finland, Italy, France, Argentina, and Brazil. Presently, there are practitioners in Africa, Central and Latin America, India, Nepal, Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Greece, Scandinavia, Canada, as well as all over Europe and in

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3. J.L. Moreno's psychodrama technique was an influence on J. Fox as he envisioned this new kind of theatre. J. Fox, at the time, was training at the Moreno Institute and went on to become an advanced practitioner and teacher of psychodrama. However, although the two techniques have common elements (the recounting and enacting of personal stories), Playback Theatre is a performance-based method in which the art and aesthetic are emphasized; it is not therapy per se. Additionally, Playback revolves around building and strengthening community bonds, while psychodrama addresses the individual. This being said, it is true that Playback is also inherently therapeutic and transformative.

4. Hereafter, I will refer to Jonathan Fox as “J. Fox” so as to keep his name distinct from mine.
Interview with Jonathan Fox

HANNAH FOX: In this article, I am investigating why Playback has taken hold across the world. I feel it has something to do with how a Playback event creates an opportunity for meaningful and compassionate human contact, which in our technologically driven world seems to be becoming more and more elusive. What are your thoughts on this?

JONATHAN FOX: In the developed world, with its fast pace and electronic communication, Playback Theatre definitely offers an opportunity for small-group, face-to-face contact. I say sometimes that we are re-creating an atmosphere that used to be part of everyday life in traditional societies, when people sat around under a tree or before a fire and shared stories with each other. From the beginning we sought to hear from the unrecognized and unnoticed. So many people have stories that no one wants to listen to. We try to create a context where such people can be heard.

H. FOX: In your book *Acts of Service* [1986], you speak about theatre that is oral instead of literary. You invoke the ancient bards such as Homer. You note how storytelling documents and preserves community knowledge, teaches ideals and values, and entertains. How is the storytelling component of Playback central to its success?

J. FOX: The big difference between the “traditional” oral tradition and Playback’s oral tradition is that instead of famous stories of great heroes, we share our own everyday stories. But the purpose is not so different. Our narrative about ourselves and our society is key to our identity. It takes critical consciousness even to have something to tell; Freire showed us that. Then seeing it embodied onstage can crystallize a sense of self that is very empowering. At the same time, even our most personal stories contain value for others. It is amazing how the process works in a Playback Theatre performance: there is always a strong connection from one story to another; the images and themes raised are always relevant to the community as a whole. Even though the stories are individual/personal, community members in fact engage in a dialogue through their stories, voicing different perspectives.

H. FOX: And the telling of our personal stories?

J. FOX: In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in personal narratives. We have performance artists making autobiographical pieces. And we have theatre artists using the personal testimony of community members to develop documentary performances. How to do this constructively, especially if you are using a story other than your own, is not a simple task. It should benefit the teller as well as the audience, I feel. I think we [Playback practitioners] have learned a lot about this over the past 30 years; we have built some knowledge.

H. FOX: It also makes me think of the advent of reality TV.

J. FOX: Reality TV uses personal experience mainly for entertainment; there is an exploitative whiff about it. Playback Theatre is based on a very different value system involving humanism and fairness.

H. FOX: Playback is over 30 years old now, and exists in over 50 countries. What do you make of this? When you look back to its early years, how do you see the method has grown and/or changed? What were your influences in dreaming up Playback Theatre?

J. FOX: When you mention impact, I think of the opposite: Playback Theatre has remained so much in the gift economy that its reach has been very limited. It is far from fulfilling its potential. My original vision was simply of a room of neighbors, a small community, with actors from that community sitting onstage ready to act out their stories. I envisioned different communities, each having their own local actors, who knew the culture and the issues of concern. I wanted the actors to be ordinary citizens—citizen actors—and I wanted the theatre to be good for them as well as for their audiences.

In later years the commitment to social justice has grown more important. Playback Theatre demands deep listening from actors and empathy with anyone’s story. It builds empathy in audience members. But we insist on balancing that with a commitment to social justice. This takes skill on the improvisational stage. It also drives our commitment to position Playback Theatre in certain settings.

(continued)
As for influences, there was my study in college of oral composition and the great epics; there were my two years in the Peace Corps in a small preindustrial village in Nepal; there was my involvement in experimental theatre, working just before the idea for Playback crystallized with Jerry Rojo at UConn [University of Connecticut; Rojo worked with Richard Schechner in both the New Orleans Group and The Performance Group]; there was my work with the theatre component of the American Dance Festival [at Connecticut College], and with the Theatre of the Deaf. Also, of course, Moreno’s psychodrama, with its emphasis on existential validation and the integration of isolates. And of course there was your grandpa’s influence (Melvin Fox). He was an actor with Eva Le Gallienne’s Civic Repertory Theatre [1930s]—but then he quit the stage and told me to stay away. He said theatre was self-indulgent and socially irresponsible. So in my way I sought both to rebel against and follow his precept. I sought to use the power of the theatrical event to build a better society. For me, theatre was always more than just entertainment. I should also mention that it was not just my influences that shaped Playback Theatre. Each member of the original company played a part. We built it together.

H. FOX: Improvisational theatre has a mixed reputation. Johnstone, Spolin, Sills, Second City, and Saturday Night Live have put comedy improv on the map. But, when asked to choose, most people opt for an evening of scripted theatre. When I was in Cuba, however, I was struck by the fervent response to interactive, spontaneous theatre. The idea seemed to strike the Cubans as radical and liberating (both in terms of acting/choices and as far as having an open “conversation” with the audience). How would you evaluate the improvisational nature of Playback Theatre? Is there a curative effect to the nonscriptedness of Playback?

J. FOX: Good question. Most improv is comic/satiric and seems limited to me. A spontaneous event that can embrace the full range of human emotions is something else entirely. Victor Turner [1974] helped me understand this. We need to travel into the unknown to go beyond ourselves. The heightened dramatic event can propel us into the “other thought.” There is risk here. People can be hurt as well as transformed. Thus we learned how important it is to contain the improvisation, or the emerging unknown, in a strong ritual of repeated behavior. The teller comes from the audience to a special chair next to the conductor. The conductor interviews briefly. The conductor says, “Let’s watch.” The actors, without huddling, perform the scene, and so forth. That ritual is not at all improvisational. It happens the same way every time.

Out of this process does come new insight, new empathy for the other, a release of pent-up feelings, a sense of new life and possibility.

H. FOX: You went to New Orleans with a Playback team to assist in the Katrina recovery process. Can you say something about this project?

J. FOX: Soon after Katrina hit we began discussions of how Playback might be offered to those affected by the storm. There had for some time been an interest in “emergency Playback,” but we had never brought it off. This time the pieces fell into place. People started to give donations to pay for teams to go down to the Gulf Coast. Realizing that most of the displaced were people of color, we focused on our own internal community and held a special training for actors and conductors who were people of color. We began networking to find hosts, such as the Ashe Cultural Center in New Orleans [http://www.ashecac.org/]. We also began training New Orleans performers in Playback Theatre, with the idea of leaving a sustainable ongoing Playback presence behind. It was a complex task organizationally, made possible by the leadership of Pamela Freeman, the African American codirector of Playback for Change in Philadelphia, who has extensive organizing as well as Playback performing experience. There was a tremendous need for New Orleanians to talk about their experience. Our performances were very intense. It felt like we fulfilled our purpose of providing ordinary people reeling from extraordinary events a way to recover their vitality and achieve dialogue through participation in an aesthetic ritual.

H. FOX: How has Playback been used in other communities in crisis and for reconciliation?

J. FOX: Skillfully conducted, Playback Theatre can be a powerful tool for helping to transform traumatic memory into narrative memory, which experts say is important for being able to move on with life after a terrible experience. One way this works is that
we have no narrative agenda. People tell just what they are ready to, what they want to, whether it is about their breakfast or being assaulted. We are ready for any story. This openness is liberating for tellers. Thus Playback is being performed in a growing number of troubled regions and localities in recovery, from southern India following the December 2004 tsunami to Rwanda and Burundi to Fiji to New Orleans. We are learning that PlaybackTheatre has promise for enabling people on different sides of a conflict to bear witness to and develop some understanding of each other’s narrative. It is still early, though. PlaybackTheatre’s potential in this domain is still being tested.

H. FOX: Creating an atmosphere of inclusivity, diversifying the Playback network membership, in terms of race, culture, and class, and using Playback as a tool for anti-oppression work has become an important focus over the last 12 years or so. At least for a number of us...

J. FOX: To combat racism and other injustices, you have to take on the incredibly forceful inertia of embedded custom—not only onstage, but in every inch of your programming and in your company life. In a country like the US, this is a daunting task, full of frustration, awkwardness, shame, and anger. At the same time there is a kind of relief that comes from trying to do something, from not just standing by.

H. FOX: Where is Playback headed? What is still left to do?

J. FOX: Proving playback’s usefulness for communities in crisis and helping to build the capacity of PlaybackTheatre companies to achieve more work in the world.

H. FOX: Your wife, my mother, Jo Salas, has been central to the development of this form. Can you say something about her work?

J. FOX: It has been a partnership. We have done it together. We complement each other in many ways. We are also involved in professional projects apart from each other. Even better than building Playback, of course, has been having you and Maddy!

H. FOX: It also seems, over the years, as Playback developed inter/nationally, beyond your reach so to speak, you (and Mom) decided to assume a giving attitude towards the work. You decided not to “own” the technique but to offer it openly and liberally. Therefore, although there is certainly a defined technique that requires extensive training and years of practice, Playback’s contours remain flexible and highly adaptable to various cultures and contexts. So, Playback is used in sixth-grade classrooms to address bullying. It is used with drug-addicted HIV patients. It is used in a state-run juvenile sex-offender program. It is used at birthday parties and bat mitzvahs. It is used in war-torn villages. It is used at diversity trainings to educate people about racism. It is used in corporations. It is used to entertain the public. What do you make of this flexibility?

J. FOX: I delight in the versatility of Playback Theatre and the uses people have made of it. As caretakers, however, we have had to constantly negotiate with our colleagues around issues of freedom and responsibility. We have tended to lean towards the apprenticeship model. If you want to learn this, come and be at our side and work at it. When you are ready, you can set up on your own. The trade-off for getting rich has been a huge family of friends and colleagues, and much honor. I am incredibly grateful.

every quadrant of the United States. The network of Playback companies has grown from a handful in the 1980s, to 17 countries in 1993, to 30 in 1999, to over 55 in 2007 with an estimated 100,000 people using Playback worldwide (IPTN n.d.). In 1990 the International Playback Theatre Network (IPTN) was established to support and link Playback practitioners around the world. There are private Playback Theatre schools that offer diploma programs in

5. Despite its exponential growth, international membership, and government sponsorships, Playback Theatre remains mostly grassroots.

6. The IPTN also supports and helps to organize the International Playback Theatre conferences, which take place in different countries approximately every three years. The most recent conference was held in São Paolo, Brazil, in August 2007.
the US and Japan, and training affiliates in Israel, Brazil, Hungary, Italy, and Germany (Centre for Playback Theatre n.d.). Each company and place expresses its own unique cultural influences and artistic style, but the fundamental technique remains consistent across borders.

What follows is a summary of some current Playback companies around the world. These particular projects are exemplary but not complete and are listed in order of when the theatres were founded.

Community Playback, Highland, NY, founded in 1985 by Judy Swallow, has been hosting monthly community performances for more than 20 years with the same core company membership.

Kainga Rua Playback Theatre, Auckland, New Zealand, founded in 1986 by Fe Day, consists of both Maori and Euro-NZ performers. Their ritual format is based on a wananga, a traditional Maori learning/teaching event or institution. The wananga emphasizes the shared time, space, and activities of daily living. These meetings last more than 24 hours—participants eat, sleep, and do Playback Theatre together. Kainga Rua is hosted by Auckland University of Technology, which lets the group use a traditionally carved Maori meeting house.

Hudson River Playback Theatre, New Paltz, NY, was established in 1990 with Jo Salas as the artistic director. HRPT is currently working with immigrants and just published a book called Half of My Heart/La Mitad de Mi Corazon (2007) documenting their stories (project made possible by a grant from the Dyson Foundation). HRPT also runs an anti-bullying program in schools. This work is discussed in Salas’s article “Using Theatre to Address Bullying” (2005). www.hudsonriverplayback.org

Tel-Aviv Playback Theatre, Israel, established in 1991 by Aviva Appel, performs for families that have lost relatives in terrorism attacks and with hospital workers, displaced teens, and domestic violence support groups. www.playback1.co.il

Playback AZ, Tokyo, Japan, established in 1993 by Kayo Munakata, is currently working with government sponsorship on gender issues with the goal of promoting equality between men and women in Japanese society. Playback AZ has offered 30 performances and workshops on this theme over the last three years all over Japan. www.playback-az.com

Essential Theatre, Tucson, Arizona, established in 1994 by Susan Southard, for the past seven years has been performing for at-risk, homeless, and paroled youth. Essential Theatre is also in its seventh year of doing Playback for adults with cerebral palsy and...
developmental disabilities who tell their stories through communication devices. For eight years, Essential Theatre has run a program for juvenile sex offenders who learn Playback skills to bring their victims’ stories to life.

*Sao Paulo Playback Theatre*, Brazil, established in 1998 by Antonio Ferrara, performs Playback for corporations, with 87 corporate performances in the first half of 2007. www.playbacktheatre.com.br

*Toronto Playback Theatre*, Canada, established in 2002 by Chris Baeyer, began working in 2005 with money from the National Crime Prevention Centre’s Community Mobilization Program to devise a one-year youth violence prevention project. TPT is also collaborating with the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation using Playback to increase awareness of breast care/cancer. www.torontoplayback.com

*Playback for Change*, Philadelphia, established in 2002 by Sarah Halley and Pamela Freeman. Recently, they created a Playback series on racial justice exploring ways to heal the wounds of racism and understand the class structure of Philadelphia society.

*Big Apple Playback Theatre*, New York City, established in 2002 by Hannah Fox, with Erica Eigenberg, to work with underprivileged populations in the New York metropolitan area. Currently BAPT is in the midst of long-term collaborations with Rivington House, the largest AIDS Residential Treatment Center in the country; Palladia Residential Drug Treatment and Domestic Violence Program; Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), and Leadership Transformation Group (LTG). www.bigappleplayback.com

*Hong Kong Playback Theatre Company*, Hong Kong, founded in 2003 by Michele Chung Lai Kwan, works with the mentally ill and delinquent teen girls.

Through his *Quakerism and the Arts* course at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, DC, drama teacher and Playback practitioner Tim Reagan has incorporated Playback Theatre into the curriculum. Every seventh grader learns Playback. The students then use Playback to reflect on their own ethical and spiritual beliefs or unbeliefs in terms of the guiding principles and practices of the Society of Friends.

The Sri Lankan contingent was founded by Australian theatre director and Playback practitioner Cymbeline Buhler when she went to Sri Lanka in 2006 and trained 15 people, ranging in age from 14 to 31, in Playback Theatre. She returned in 2007 with Clare Therese (India) to offer them further training, and to start two new groups, each consisting of 20 participants. These Sri Lankan groups all continue to meet for regular rehearsals, with the goal of performing for local children, people in refugee camps and other displaced communities.

I am personally fascinated by the trajectory of Playback Theatre because I have watched it blossom from its very beginning. It grew up with me—a kind of sibling to my sister and me.7 I was on the scene as a child in the early days when my parents and their friends were shaping Playback Theatre. I remember my father being distracted in those days, as though he were spinning a spider web in his own mind. I would ask him a question about my homework or if he could take me to so-and-so’s house and it would take what seemed like an interminable amount of time for a response. I remember the company would rehearse on Thursday evenings, sometimes in our house, often at the Mid-Hudson Arts and Science center in Poughkeepsie. My sister and I would tag along if we had to, watching our parents run around the big wooden room with the others making loud and funny noises, playing with props and costumes. In those days the company wore bright colored overalls, performed guerrilla theatre in parks and at festivals, and performed other productions.

7. Maddy Fox, my sister, a former union organizer, is studying in CUNY’s Social Psychology PhD program. She practices Playback peripherally.
and moved around like a tribe. The company members were an extended family for me. At the company's ten-year anniversary party in 1985, all of the Playback kids received T-shirts that read, “I wish my parents were normal.” Over many years of experimenting, the components of the Playback ritual solidified: the teller's and conductor's chairs placed stage right; the line of boxes upstage, colorful pieces of fabric hanging on a scarf tree (a wooden structure especially built for Playback, or perhaps a ladder); the musical instruments stage left; the actor introductions at the start of the show; the classic forms “fluid sculptures” (actors create a moving sculpture based on audience input) and pairs (two actors enact opposing feelings an audience member expresses); and the charged words, “Let’s Watch,” which pass the teller’s story onto the stage for the actors to bring to life.

**Empathic Connection**

I believe the reason that Playback Theatre has grown so swiftly into a worldwide movement is because Playback enhances meaningful human connection, compassionate listening, and utilizes the age-old entertainment of storytelling. In Playback Theatre, one can be struck by the reassuring, if sometimes radical, realization that in fact we are not alone in our struggle. We can tell our story and then see professional actors play that story back to us and the audience. By participating in this process, the storytellers let something go, donate a piece of their lives to art, entertainment, and social-individual healing.

In the 21st century, despite its “smart” cars and weapons, genetic engineering and human cloning, digital gadgets, and holiday trips to space, meaningful face-to-face human contact seems to be declining. It’s easy to converse with others in cyberspace via your laptop, Blackberry, or cell phone. In fact, people are seeing and listening to each other less and less, almost avoiding each other despite appearing to be in continuous contact, always online. People hardly notice each other as they pass on the street with phones pressed to their ears. Paradoxically, we are in “communication” rather than in “touch.” Playback is not immune to this trend. More and more, when I ask people how they first heard of Playback, the answer is, “I found you online.” The internet has been an extremely helpful tool in exposing people to Playback Theatre around the world.

Many people suffer from isolation and disconnection—at work, in the community, from families and loved ones. Alienation, powerlessness, stripped identity, and low self-esteem easily churn into depression and abusive behavior. Playback is a response to these feelings and the negative behavior they engender. Richard Schechner points out that probably the earliest human bands met at “ceremonial centers” where groups would exchange dances, songs, and dramas (1977:110). At these gatherings the participants performed to bring about a result or commemorate an important event, such as dancing for rain, celebrating a birth, praying for a good harvest, healing the sick. Many modern-day practitioners understand the potential for performance to
do more than entertain. Appropriately in the Playback context, Schechner observes that Western theatre has become increasingly ritualized over the last century, “moving into arenas of human interaction once reserved for religion; and as society is cyberneticized and contact between people programmed, theatre gains importance as an activity occupying a niche between unstructured activity […] and […] formalized or mediated exchanges” (1977:160).

Playback Theatre exists in this niche where personal interaction meets ritual theatre. It acts as an antidote to our fragmented society by offering an alternative, publicly intimate way of being together. Playback and similar theatre practices—such as Boal’s—answer a cry for empathic connection in a technologically dominated, market-driven capitalist world. Unlike fundamentalist religions—which are drawing millions of adherents—Playback gives agency to its participants rather than demanding surrender from them. Playback is a kind of town hall meeting where people assemble to speak their minds. Except in Playback this speaking takes the form of storytelling, which is, in turn, acted out by performers. In Playback's town meetings theatre is the means by which individual stories become community dramas. What follows, if the performances are effective, is insight, and even catharsis: knowledge, entertainment, and healing brought about by empathy. As I hear your tale and watch it unfold onstage, I am moved because it reminds me of a part of my own story. Suddenly I feel less isolated; I experience human interconnectedness.

Educative and Curative Functions vs. Self-Censorship

In Playback Theatre the shape, size, or subject of one's personal narrative is not stipulated: stories range from the mundane to the sublime and pull from both recent events and old memories. The actors will respond with equal attention and respect to a story about a woman's morning walk to work under the blooming magnolia trees and to a story about a man who just attended the funeral of his older brother.

Ultimately, telling personal stories becomes a way to explore issues of identity within the self, the community, and the culture. We identify with different aspects of each other's experiences. An enacted personal narrative is a house of mirrors. The process of sharing life stories reflects in multiple directions: narrator to self, narrator to listener, narrator to society, listener to society, and personal story to historical story.

Many anthropologists and psychologists agree that this tendency or need goes back a long way in human history and prehistory. Barbara Myerhoff maintains that, “Homo narrans, humankind as storyteller, is a human constant. […] People everywhere have always needed to narrate their lives and worlds, as surely as they have needed food, love, sex, and safety” (in Fine and Speer 1992:10). Psychotherapists Peter Harper and Mary Gray write:

Stories perpetuate knowledge and connect succeeding generations to the richness of their heritage. […] They represent the culture, traditions, attitudes, and values of a race or a nation. […] Stories are not simply a means of entertainment and recreation. They have intellectual and educative functions and are potentially curative when they facilitate the safe rediscovery and reconsideration of the often denied shadow elements of our lives. […] It is contended that prosocial behaviour and its core ingredients of empathy, reciprocity, and intimacy are promoted through the process level of storytelling. This is a highly complex process and is often experienced simultaneously at various levels—at the level of personal consciousness, at the level of personal unconscious, at the level of the communal unconscious or transpersonal, and at the somatic level. (1997:44)

But despite this, inevitably at any Playback Theatre performance there will be audience members who do not feel ready to bring their story to the public or for whom there is not enough time. In the usual hour-and-a-half performance time, with an average 50 people attending, 12 to 15 individuals will offer stories. There is simply not enough time for everyone to tell, unless the group is small or is together for an extended time. For the Playback ritual to
work, a quorum of storytellers must offer their stories. Without volunteered stories, there is no theatre to play back.

It is critical then for the Playback conductor and acting team to create a safe, open, and inviting environment. Tactics vary. A general public will show a different amount of resistance/readiness than a group of adjudicated youth, a room full of senior citizens or business executives, or a class of school kids. Song is commonly used at the beginning of a Playback performance to invoke ritual space, soothe nerves, raise emotions, awaken the imagination, and open the heart. Frequently the Playback performers introduce themselves as citizen actors by animating small pieces of their own stories, modeling the form before shifting the focus to the audience.

Typically, at some point in the performance, the conductor will pause the action onstage and invite audience members to turn to someone sitting nearby whom they don’t already know and introduce themselves. The conductor might also encourage people to tell this new acquaintance a possible title or the topic of a personal story that might be in their minds at this point. This connects audience members on a tangible level, deepens trust, and emphasizes the claim that Playback is a “theatre of neighbors, not strangers,” as J. Fox often says during performances. But even with careful attention and deliberate strategies, the spontaneous core of Playback means that one never can be sure who among the audience will feel comfortable participating.

Analyzing why someone chooses to tell or not tell a story is complex and multilayered. One needs to consider the individual psychology and experience, the group experience and collective psyche, as well as the sociopolitical context in which the event is happening. The desire to tell and how someone negotiates that urge (accept or block) will change depending on the day and how familiar someone is with the Playback procedure. It will also depend on whether or not the audience is a previously defined community or a group of strangers.

Australian Playback practitioner Rea Dennis addresses the “tension of participation” in her 2004 PhD dissertation on audience members’ experiences in Playback Theatre. Dennis found that, “[e]stablishing a ritual frame serves to announce that a certain set of rules are at play and releases participants to act beyond their constrained domestic roles and engage in other ways with themselves, with each other, and with the social environment” (2004:6). But as Dennis acknowledges, in any given group there will be members who are unwilling to publicize a private story.

Reasons for not telling at a Playback Theatre event are plentiful and always present. One person may experience stage fright and/or fear of exposure; another might be overly self-judgmental: “No one wants to hear my story,” “My story is boring,” “My story is too long and confusing.” At a recent performance a friend of mine didn’t raise his hand to tell a story, although he had a strong urge to, because he “didn’t want to bring the mood down.” His story was about how he had to fire someone at work that day. At a subsequent performance, he did volunteer the story. Another person may not be satisfied with the artistry of the performance and remain skeptical and distrustful until the end. Or a person may feel too triggered and emotional by what has been told so far to speak in front of the crowd. For a few, no story comes to mind. Dennis comments:

Discussion group transcripts reveal that there are times when persistent stories are left untold at the end of the performance because the audience member concerned does not experience the combined conditions required for them to surrender to the ritual moment. Informants reveal that a decision not to tell can be linked to a number of factors: the participant’s reading of and comfort with the venue and the audience, the participant’s relationship to the context, and the participant’s overall expectations of the event.

Indeed, the expectations of the audience is a key factor in the success or failure of a Playback event. Added to all this is the self-evaluating of the storyteller. “Did I tell the right story?” “I should have told something else,” and “What do they think of me now?” are common.
When the Ritual Breaks Down

In the winter of 2005, my company was commissioned by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum to offer a series of performances on the theme of immigration. We were excited about celebrating the richness of New York City’s diverse culture and also for the opportunity to bring Playback downtown. Because we weren’t producing, we had no idea who would attend each night. It turned out that all kinds of people came: tourists and New York natives, young people, the elderly, recent immigrants, and those who arrived in America close to a century ago. Many audience members reserved a ticket for our show in conjunction with the museum tour. Although many of the “Coming to America” stories we played back were substantial and poignant, as the conductor I felt like I was a dentist pulling teeth. There were a couple of performances where I found myself practically begging for someone to break the ice and volunteer a story. About halfway through the run it dawned on me that to encounter this kind of participatory theatre, cold, off the street, could be extremely daunting. When people hear “theatre performance,” they think they will watch as one of many anonymous spectators. People don’t expect the house lights to stay on, to be seen, and even called upon to help shape the action. The surprise of interaction frightened people into silence. But once the first story was told others followed, even if haltingly.

Another show when the ritual was in crisis comes to mind. Again this was a public show, the first of two nights, at a small theatre near Union Square. It was a cold December night and only 10 of the 40 seats were occupied. Not only was the energy level low, but there was a huge pressure on this handful of people to offer up their life experiences. On the upside, almost everybody got a chance to speak. The process of volunteering was painstakingly slow, however, and I could see the morale of the actors sinking. Again, as the conductor, I had to make the room cozy enough for people to feel comfortable to take a risk and share. After the performance, I was acutely aware of how the Playback ritual can fall short if certain circumstances are not in place, such as assembling a critical mass—which will assure enough energy for a theatre event as well as an adequate ratio of tellers to nontellers—particularly in the public context. As a follow up that spring, we reluctantly agreed to another public show—this time, based on the low turnout in December, for just one night. Much to our complete surprise, over 65 people showed up, standing room only.

A European colleague told me about a performance her company did for a group of parents and social workers in which the parents didn’t show up and the social workers—who were forced to attend—sneered and snickered the whole way through. No one raised a hand to tell a story. The school coordinator had set up the event poorly, and in the face of such difficult conditions, my colleague and her company had to stop the show.

My company, the Big Apple Playback Theatre, focuses on commissioned work rather than public performances—although many companies around the globe schedule monthly public shows. However, I think that, although someone brand new to Playback might be pleasantly surprised and even titillated by the invitation to tell a piece of her or his life story, Playback works best when audiences are informed about the interactive and personal nature of the form beforehand and know what to expect. Alternatively, if a Playback performance is specifically being used as a tool for community building, staff development, or crisis intervention/reconciliation for a particular group (rather than for the public), the ritual is eased by the fact that the audience members already have an existing relationship with each other and have gathered for a shared purpose.

Undeniably, self-censorship is prevalent at every Playback event—every once in a while enough so that the ritual implodes. But, most of the time there are enough people who do want to tell (often more than we have time for), and the appropriate stories for that moment emerge. The collection of experiences narrated and played back will in some way represent the collective story of the room. If we are in fact interconnected and fit inside each others’ stories, and all our
stories are different aspects of the same mythology, then perhaps I don’t need to tell my story this time and will get more out of listening to my neighbor’s. Although a quorum of tellers is needed, as important is a quorum of listeners and witnesses. A friend who is a New York City taxi driver attends almost all of our performances because he loves to hear people’s stories and see them played back. He finds the shows very entertaining but in all the years he has been attending, he has never shared his own story. He is satisfied playing the role of witness.

At a different public show in New York, someone came up to the stage to tell a story about riding the city bus home from work. It was rush hour, the bus was crowded and hot, and people were cranky. Out of nowhere a male passenger began to verbally abuse another man nearby. As the teller recounted, the passenger began to call the young man “gay,” “fag,” “homo,” and “sissy” loud enough for everyone on the bus to hear. This belligerent behavior went on for several blocks—the teller and other passengers growing more and more uncomfortable. “What do I do in a situation like this?” the teller asked herself, “Do I defend this stranger?” Eventually, to everyone’s relief, and at a few people’s strong urging, the abuser got off the bus. Someone gave him the finger out the window, and before the teller knew it, she and everyone else still on the bus, joined him in the gesture. This moment was acted out by the Playback group as a Greek chorus giving the man the finger while singing the national anthem. The audience loved this transformation. After seeing her story performed by the Playback company, there was a feeling of solidarity in the room. The audience cheered loudly at the critical point in the story. The teller was able to reflect on her fear of speaking out against an incident of public harassment.

In a battered women’s shelter in the Bronx, 18 Latina and African American women gathered for Playback in a small basement room while their children were looked after in a room down the hall. I made the mistake of assuming these women who live under the same roof (in separate apartments I found out later) all knew each other and each other’s stories, so I didn’t do as extensive a warm up as I should have. At first, the women didn’t say a word; they didn’t trust each other or us. The room was tense, cold, and quiet. After a significant amount of time, one woman cautiously told of how, as she was walking her small child to school that morning, they saw a woman friend being beaten in front of another shelter nearby. The perpetrator had found out the street address even though that information was supposed to be confidential. The teller was terrified that she and her children might in fact not be safe in her own shelter. More stories followed.

Another woman told that she discovered her 15-year-old son molesting her seven- and eight-year-old daughters by asking the youngest to perform fellatio on him while the other one watched. As painful as this has been, the story was about how she has forgiven him. “It is not his fault,” she told the room, “It is society. It is bigger than him.” The young man is presently enrolled in a residential juvenile sex-offender program, and she and her two daughters visit him regularly.

Finally, in the summer of 2006 we were asked to perform for a principal’s retreat in an urban, poor, black school district that is in crisis. As one man put it, “We have been through a war. We have been silenced.” After continuous accounts of corruption, firings, backstabbing, betrayal, painful confrontations, and resignations, this community of 70 administrators were not speaking to each other. Saying how one feels could cost a person his job. Frankly, I wasn’t sure if Playback would work in such a hot spot. Will they tell their stories? Will they respond to theatre? After a moment’s hesitation, they did. The room flooded with stories, tears, and laughter. “Thank you for getting us to talk. We are deeply grateful to you for creating a space for dialogue,” they told us after a standing ovation. We didn’t fix or solve their problems, but we did help them move into the first stage of the healing process.

Are the stories offered always true? To what degree do people edit or even fictionalize? Here the Playback conductor and performers have to take the storyteller at face value—accepting the possibility that people exaggerate and change the facts. My own feeling is that the great majority
of stories are true—that is, offered as they are recalled whether or not the recollection is 100 percent what “really happened” (as if this can ever be known with finality).

And what about stories told in a condition of government censorship and overt political and/or police control? In Cuba, where censorship is government law and the collective experience is prioritized, Playback offers a radical chance for the individual story to come forward. This could be the reason for its popularity there. But I do not know to what degree people held back, telling purely personal stories, stories that did not challenge the government or disparage Castro or other public officials. There are many variations on this theme. In Hungary, after more than 50 years of official interrogation by the communist regime, people are especially nervous about being questioned. Therefore, the conductors in Hungarian Playback companies are careful not to interrupt the tellers with questions as we would in other contexts. In places where people are particularly private with their lives, such as Finland, it is not unusual for a Playback teller to feel a sense of shame after telling her personal story, even if she doesn’t regret telling. On a theatre tour through rural Cameroon, West Africa, we ended our hour-long performance about living with AIDS with Playback. It was difficult for our audiences of villagers, health workers, and school children to speak to the subject matter directly in the first person, so I asked for feelings, comments, and experiences in the third person, the hypothetical. When someone trusts his community enough to tell a story that exposes a deep truth, his courage and vulnerability lifts everyone in the room. In the Playback ritual we are addressing human rights by first focusing light on the quest and struggle of the individual.

Coda

Playback is spontaneous, sometimes sloppy, often magical, and never perfect. As in most improvisation, there will inevitably be missed moments. Our goal as Playback performers is to catch and replay the essence of a story with grace and aesthetic awareness. Because the Playback method is used by eclectic groups of people with varying degrees of training, performance standards vary widely. I’ve attended some shows that I could barely sit through because of the inadequacy of the performers’ artistic skills.8 To create compelling Playback Theatre requires years of training and practice. There is a movement within the Playback community to professionalize and standardize the artistic element of the technique. Ultimately, I view Playback Theatre as a “new ritual” (Myerhoff and Moore 1977) for the 21st century, an artistic happening that offers connection and empathic understanding, or communitas (Turner 1969), to our often fragmented communities.

It is my last night in Cuba. I am in the audience at a Playback performance presented by the

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participants of the workshop following mine. The audience, about 50 people of mixed backgrounds, is chock-full of stories, and the conductor cannot call on every hand. She picks me, and I tell a story, a “pair,” about how inspired and nourished I have felt during my two-week stay, and how sad I am to say goodbye and go back up north to the winter cold. The actors act out my predicament in a way that is poignant and entertaining. Playback Theatre is clearly “working” in this community. At the party afterwards, there are bottles of rum, music, dancing—and balloons. One of the actors has brought 50 or 60 colorful balloons, enough for everyone. We dance and sing and keep the balloons in the air for hours. Every time a balloon pops, the crowd collectively calls out, “Abajo Bush!” (Down with Bush!).

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