

PLAYBACK – JONATHAN FOX

WHAT'S THE STORY?

In May 2006, as part of the 'Inspiring Voices' critical debate series, NAYD brought Jonathan Fox, founder of Playback Theatre to Dublin to address an audience of youth theatre and professional theatre practitioners on Playback Theatre as a source of inspiration to a group, with particular emphasis on the youth theatre context. The seminar was interspersed with illustrative stories and performances; the following is an abridged version of the address.

What I have to share with you is what has inspired me and guided me over my thirty years of theatre, and particularly Playback Theatre. I'm going to focus on four things principally: the first is the area of spontaneity; the second is called story; the third is the social interactive aspect of what we do; and the fourth is ritual. In the course of my talk we will have some interludes where we actually do some playback theatre.

As we continue on I'll give you some examples of how Playback Theatre is used for and with youth, and offer some guidelines for those of you who might be interested in using playback in working with youth.

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I like the idea that every one of us has a kind of native dramatic talent. We have an in-born expressive capability. We can all be actors.

One day I had this idea, and it was the idea that later became Playback. I knew the moment I had it that this was what I had been searching for. The vision I had was of people sitting in a hall, facing a stage with actors on the stage facing them. These actors would be members of the same community that would be there, ready, available to act out the stories, the real stories of the people. My vision was also an aesthetic one: whatever anybody told, these actors would be ready to make it into art and that's what got me going with Playback Theatre.

The basic idea of Playback Theatre is very simple – somebody tells something, whatever it is and the actors act it out on the spot.

In improvisation there are usually different forms that you might use, different ways of dramatising material. A Playback performance, which usually lasts an hour and a half, would contain short forms and longer forms, both narrative and non-narrative.

Playback is used in a performance setting and also a workshop setting. In a workshop setting, a facilitator would animate a group, facilitate or teach them to tell and to act, to act out stories for each other. In a performance setting you will have a team of trained or experienced actors to act and the audience will be the tellers. So you can see the distinction between the workshop form and performance.

Playback theatre is based on an idea of stories, people telling their stories or parts of their story. When I was in university I studied the oral tradition. In the oral tradition the poets or the bards sing tales and these tales are highly entertaining. People would come and spend their long winter nights listening to these tales. But they are more than just entertainment, the stories contain what needs to be remembered, the stories contain moral precepts for the people. Over the years I have come to belief in a kind of folk wisdom. That actually

what people have to tell, even though it is very spontaneous or may not be thought through, actually has guidance for us. So it works in the same way as the oral tradition works everywhere. It's entertaining and it's something more than entertaining.

Another aspect is that the stories we tell are often direct, but stories often work in ways that are very indirect. I'll give you an example. We have been bringing Playback Theatre to people who are displaced and evacuated from New Orleans after the hurricanes. We performed in a number of venues one of which was a school. There was a boy in that school, he was about eleven years old, we'll call him Gerald, and Gerald's story was this:

'We were evacuated from New Orleans to Texas and I play football and I was playing football outside our new house in Texas and this huge kid knocked me down and really, really hurt my knee.'

That's the story. Okay so it's a kid telling a sports story. But if we really listen, it's about more than that. It's a story of his whole experience, it's a story about vulnerability, about injury. So many people in New Orleans became vulnerable and experienced so many different kinds of injuries. Furthermore it wasn't only what he was telling us but his manner of telling us that was important because he sat on the chair and he oozed athleticism, he sat on the chair very confidently. You could appreciate what he wasn't telling which was that he was back now, he was playing football again, on his own turf and he wasn't injured. So I think of that story as an example of the metaphorical or the indirect way that stories work. We cherish that in Playback theatre and we listen for these kinds of metaphors.

Another aspect of the way that Playback Theatre works is that the telling of a story somehow helps define your identity. I tell something: I may not have really thought about it but telling that story reminds me and sometimes surprises me. It can tell me for the first time in a new way who I really am and in that way it can be empowering. Sometimes people tell something and that telling is a huge personal step. It is not the reason we are doing it but it is a by-product that is very important.

Also when we have the telling of one story and another story and another story, the stories respond to each other in some way. So you have a child who tells their story about their parents and before you know it you have an older person tell a story with the children in it, for example. I'm saying this very simply but people share their perspectives and so Playback Theatre has become a tool to promote dialogue.

There is also a social interactive part of our work. There has to be a somewhat positive feeling in the room for this to work at all. If there isn't, why would anyone want to speak out, raise their hand, tell their story? This may happen because the team in some way is very clumsy in relating to people, especially the conductor or it could be that the place is not suitable or the environment, for example, too hot, too cold, too familiar, too strange. The social element may have nothing to do with what the actors are doing on stage, it is a part of the whole mix and we have to be aware of that. There is also a meta-level drama going on where you are not only watching the actors in terms of their skill but you are also watching them in terms of their social interaction on stage, who steps out, who doesn't. It is very visible and very interesting. In the Playback format the story-tellers are here among us and visible, you are hearing and sensing how are they feeling about what they are seeing on stage. If they are not feeling at least on the positive side, people are not going to want to talk. And sometimes that happens. We can start and things are going well and somehow, everyone, all of a sudden, starts to make mistakes and things start to go downhill and into a hole. Of course we aim for it to work the other way where the

atmosphere will get warmer and warmer and people will become readier and readier to talk.

Another aspect of the social interaction is that you see the actors listening and in order for them to do it well they have to develop a really deep listening skill. This takes time. They are hearing the different levels of the story and this striving to understand is an important part of Playback theatre. It is the first step in the building of empathy. Deep listening and empathetic reaching is one of the aspects of our work. It has been very, very rewarding for us to learn and listen this way. In the teaching that we do, I think part of it is to teach people how to listen. If you place a value on listening of course you are very aware that some people speak up and others don't. Some people are silent, and no matter how hard you listen, you are not going to hear them. Often it is because they are shy or they have a personality that does not make it easy for them to speak up in front of an audience. But there are also people whose shyness has deep social and political roots. They are shy because they belong to an ethnic or economic group that often has or are not been treated well. They know personally or have learnt from their families that if they speak up, that it might be dangerous for them. It is important to appreciate that it is not enough for us to ask 'Who wants to speak?' What about the ones that aren't speaking? Do we care about them? Yes and in fact we do care about them. So how do we encourage those that might be quiet to trust enough to speak up? That's a big question and the answer is not uncomplicated.

So listening takes us into very difficult areas and you might think it's too complicated to go there. But theatre has a tremendous potential for creating transformational events if we are willing to go there and if we have the skill. So social change has become quite a big part of my awareness in the last ten years as I continue with Playback theatre. It is part of social interaction at the deepest level, where the personal story and the socio-political story intercept and where there is often taboo against telling. So Playback theatre has potential to really help communities to tell those stories in a way that can be positive as well as being really compelling to see on the stage.

For those stories to emerge at all, it takes a readiness and courage on the part of the actors to bring their art, their skills, their craft and their listening skills to the stories.

Playback Theatre is totally improvisational, you can tell anything and the actors are going to do it. But there is a structure under it. This structure is really important. For example, I am the conductor, I am going to ask you for a story, once you have spoken I am going to say 'Let's Watch'. You may not mark it consciously but that is a kind of formula for telling you that one part is finished and another is about to begin. The actors do their piece and after that there is an acknowledgement of the teller in some way. That part is really important. So you see it comes from the audience, through the conductor to the actors and back to the audience through the conductor. It happens the same way every time.

The structure is important to provide a kind of safety, a framework so people don't get anxious about it. Rituals also have a rhythm. Rituals provide safety in moving forward. This is important in Playback also.

The ritual allows for a process to take place where the last story is often one that is amazingly positive no matter how serious the other stories have been. So that is another reason why we accept any story. On one occasion a person told a story about their grandfather passing away. This story had moved someone else so much that they had to speak up and said that the same thing had happened to their grandfather and she stood

up and told her grandfather story. After that I turned back to a man who had wanted to tell a story and he said he couldn't tell his story after the serious ones that had gone before. But I said please and he told his story. It was very simple. "I was walking in the woods and I saw a deer and the deer looked at me and I looked at the deer." It was the perfect story for that moment.

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I don't want to conclude without making some reference to 'The Voices of Authority'. I am speaking especially in an American context. One voice of authority says that Playback Theatre is not theatre. It's been difficult for us to position something that is so in the moment, that is not a product, that is so ephemeral, that has no title, that has no script. The Arts Councils in the US have overwhelmingly responded in an exclusionary way to this kind of approach. I've never doubted that it is theatre. By now of course we have many respected and respectable colleagues that believe it is theatre. It is something we have had to deal with over the years and have carried on without official support, which in the States is very slim.

Another voice of authority says that Playback Theatre is therapy. Often it is social workers that say it is dangerous. Someone might tell something that is just too much for them, they suggest. We've spent thirty years developing our craft in a responsible and ethical way so we have a method and approach where that doesn't happen. Often when someone says this it could be dangerous it is someone who is afraid of feelings, afraid to see deep feeling on stage, especially when live. I ask myself is Saturday night box office in Tokyo, Budapest or New York, therapy? Is Playback Theatre being taught as a subject in theatre schools in Le Havre, Sydney, Helsinki therapy? Is Playback Theatre as part of theatre courses in many universities, therapy?

Another voice of authority criticises Playback Theatre because it is not instrumental, that it is not problem solving. It doesn't give you solutions. This is one difference between Playback Theatre and Augusto Boal's Theatre Of The Oppressed, although their ultimate goals are very compatible. Forum Theatre tends to try and find solutions to social problems. Playback Theatre works in a different way, not trying to find solutions. We just want to hear the stories. In the telling of the stories often very positive developments happen but like all good art we are not interested in solving problems.

Finally Playback Theatre isn't a quick learn, and it works best with small numbers of people.

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If you are interested in using Playback at all, what are some of the guidelines for you to use? I've mentioned spontaneity and story, which has to do with the art of what we are doing, the social interaction and the ritual. The most important thing as a facilitator is you help to find balance of those things. If it leans too much the one way it is not going to work. You have examples of Playback teams who have terrific skills and are all professional actors, but the social interaction; they don't know how to do it. So no matter how brilliant it is, you just don't get the right feeling. They don't really engage with it. You also have examples where it leans too much the other way. So it is the balance that is important. If you find the right balance, if you have a setting for Playback Theatre where the actors aren't so skilled but somehow the facilitator, the actors and the audience are finding the

balance, then you have a very, very deep experience and it can happen at different levels. This balance is what we are aiming for.

It is important to create conditions where this will work. There is necessity and a potential for organizing programmes where Playback can be positioned, where you are going to get stories that need to be told. If you are interested in this kind of thing then having some training in it will help you be successful. There are Playback people here in Ireland, some of them offer short courses and Playback has been part of NAYD. It helps to get some training particularly in achieving the balance.

So if you pursue Playback Theatre what might the benefits be? For the young people themselves? This combination of expressiveness and role flexibility and teamwork and having an actor, a playwright and a director, putting a story on the stage, in the moment, without any rehearsal, this is really great practice, very exciting and an incredible artistic challenge. The telling of your story can strengthen your identity and can be very empowering. It's an experience that emphasizes the value of relationships and teamwork because this cannot be done without teamwork. It's a big alternative to the click-click culture. I want to say that experiencing joy is also important.

I want to end on the note that it has been so enriching for me to be a witness and to act out so many different stories. It has been a great inspiration, really a guideline for life to be involved in this.

***Jonathan Fox** is founder of Playback Theatre and Director of the School of Playback Theatre in New York.*

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