

Reflection on practice and Approach of Playback

In an atmosphere of openness, communication, and exchange, the 'conductor' of the show, in the role of liaison and presenter invites someone to tell a story. On the stage, a group of actors spontaneously enact or 'play back' the personal story or moment that the 'teller' narrated. In other words a group/audience member tells a story which the actors then immediately recreate on stage. A member of the group/audience tells a story and then experiences their story been told. This is essentially the concept of the Playback method.

Fundamentally, Playback Theatre encourages participating collectively in the ritual of sharing. Sharing is also one of the fundamentals of youth theatre; members share an interest, have shared experiences and a shared sense of friendship. Therefore, this process lends itself well to youth theatre work. It also incorporates traditional theatrical conventions such as physical expression, ensemble and improvisation. It also integrates different developments for the youth theatre members such as listening, understanding, expression and action.

Applying Playback to youth theatre practice

Practically the Playback process allows youth theatre members many avenues of theatrical exploration. Taking an autobiographical approach can act as a challenging and interesting approach for a youth theatre. The stories could inspire a piece, a character, a situation, a style of performance, identify an interesting relationship, or define a physical environment. As a dramatic practice, Playback aids the visualizing and structuring of stories; it can also open an experimental and sensuous processing of imagined and symbolic material. Perhaps a particular theme may be chosen in advance, this theme could guide the course of the Playback session, which may in turn provide a starting point for a devising session. Also 'ensemble' is a strong element in Playback; in order for an improvised piece to be successful, the actors must work together responsively to define the emotions and action of the scene.

This process could also be used as an introduction for new members in terms of storytelling, experimental theatre, and improvisation. New members could be integrated into the group giving them the soft-focus role of tellers with experienced members assuming the role of actors. This would encourage the members to begin to engage and connect through the storytelling and enacting of the narrative. As an acting exercise, it may be an interesting alternative to interviewing and hot-seating characters. As their stories and memories are played out, we see the characters relive the emotions of the situation.

The Challenges and Benefits

For the actors, the main objective is to interpret the story through a creative response. This form of improvisation is quite challenging, as members need to learn how to comprehend the literal and symbolic meaning of a story and then re-enact it as authentically and empathetically as possible. But this technique

also offers the group a structure within which they can experiment and improvise because the audience provides the material for what happens on stage.

For the tellers, learning to articulate oneself or recount a lived experience is not always easy. But this process attempts to establish a safe place where stories and emotions can be displayed and explored. Also the group is taking part in dialogue and communication that is initiated and controlled by them.

As a practitioner, I feel that there are many benefits of Playback Theatre. Firstly, Playback provides essential theatre training in such areas as improvisation, creative development, role-play and experimental theatre. It also encourages personal development by cultivating a capacity for listening and comprehension, understanding and expression of emotions and most importantly it offers the group an opportunity for greater awareness of themselves and others within their group. The results are extremely engaging. Each performance/session is unique and very personal to the group.

To be willing to share the stories is important, but perhaps the crucial thing for a youth theatre member is the participation in this process, to be part of the shared experience. For a youth theatre member, Playback Theatre is invaluable: it provides a chance to hear interesting stories and make a terrain of discoveries, about themselves and the group, while learning to embrace and explore artistic techniques. It will definitely be an important part of my youth theatre practice from now on. Thanks to NAYD for another wonderful opportunity to learn as a Youth Theatre leader!

Fiona McDonagh of Mayo Youth Theatre, Ballina, attended the Playback Theatre master-class with Jonathan Fox on 14th May 2006

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